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Rising Above Racism

by François Dubet

What responses does racial stigma awaken in its victims? Researching in Brazil, the United States and Israel, a group of sociologists sheds new light on the experience of discrimination and collective sources of resilience.

Reviewed: Michèle Lamont, Graziella Moraes Silva, Jessica S. Welburn, Joshua Guetzkow, Nissim Mizrachi, Hanna Herzog and Elisa Reis, *Getting Respect. Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil & Israel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016, 377 pp.

For several decades there has been a continual flow of research on racism, ethnic prejudice, discrimination and race relations. When it comes to the United States, we may even feel we already "know everything" about race relations, particularly with regard to black issues. Even so, *Getting Respect* is an original book on a number of counts.

Experiences, cultures and societies

Based on more than 450 interviews conducted in Brazil, the United States and Israel, *Getting Respect* firmly takes the side of the victims of discrimination. It does not describe the causes and mechanisms of discrimination, whether voluntary or systemic, but rather explores what discrimination does to individuals. This far-reaching survey seeks to understand people's experiences of discrimination, and it is particularly welcome in view of the fact that discrimination is different from injustice, such as the social injustice related to the distribution of goods and wealth. Instead, discrimination is associated with stigma, aggression, insult, mistrust, avoidance and hypocrisy, which undermine the dignity and worth of people far beyond mere equality. It is a continual test of their own merit, identity, culture, bodies and the respect due to them. *Getting Respect* is both a major survey of "ordinary workers" discriminated against

and stigmatised in an ordinary way, and a quasi-phenomenology of the trivial and yet scandalous social experiences of individuals who come up against racism, contempt and indifference because of what they are and the colour of their skin.

However, the individuals interviewed are not merely victims, and *Getting Respect* asks about their resilience and their capacity to respond and resist injustice. How do they perceive the stigma they suffer? What is the right response when a woman holds her bag tighter when she passes a black man in a lift or when, jokingly, someone expresses surprise that a black person can speak so well when his ancestors were so closely related to monkeys? One can answer, show aggression, keep quiet, avoid confrontation, pretend not to have seen or heard anything or simply bite one's tongue. Beyond the individual answers given, *Getting Respect* shows that those questioned have at their disposal collective stories and repertoires of action that enable them to make sense of these attacks, to respond and, above all, to construct their own dignity. It is not the same thing to be the target of racist insults in a society where everyone remembers the fight for racial equality as it is to live in a society that does not believe the problem exists, or to belong to a group that is discriminated against by law.

Getting Respect is part of a programme of comparative cultural sociology whose principles were outlined by Michèle Lamont in the early 1990s[1]. The theory that personal experience is embedded in symbolic and social frameworks that go beyond those principles and give them meaning calls for a comparative perspective. These cultural and social universes constitute both an "objective" structuring of social inequality and segregation, and a set of fantasies and stories that societies create about themselves. Indeed, the condition of discriminated groups varies considerably by country: inequality may be more or less marked, spatial and social boundaries may be more or less impermeable or porous, while marriages and working relationships may be more or less open or closed between different groups. These morphological dimensions should be linked with the strength of national identifications and the nature of the narratives that enable those involved to explain what happens to them and what gives them a horizon and an ability to project themselves, whether as part of a collective struggle or their own personal destiny underpinned by a dream of emancipation and promotion. Each society offers repertoires of identity and repertoires of action.

One quality that stands out above the rest is the book's capacity to combine descriptions of people's individual ordeals with collective frameworks and narratives. *Getting Respect* thus avoids two pitfalls: allowing discrimination to scatter into interactions that are so specific that they overlook the structures and accounts that inform social life; and crushing people's personal experiences under the weight of collective categories that often function as stereotypes. While maintaining its demonstrative purpose, *Getting Respect* is equally rigorous in its description of individual experiences and societal characteristics.

1 M. Lamont, *La Morale et l'Argent. La culture des cadres en France et aux États-Unis*, Paris, Éditions Métailié, 1995; M. Lamont, L. Thévenot, *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology. Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*, London, Cambridge University Press, Paris, Éditions de la MSH, 2000.

The book is organised in a highly readable and coherent way. Each of the three main parts, which focus on the United States, Brazil and Israel, opens with a historical and economic overview of the situation of the minorities who are interviewed. Each part then analyses how those minorities define themselves, then outlines the boundaries that separate them from the majority groups. The chapters that follow are devoted to people's experience of discrimination and stigma in each country, and then make an analysis of actors' responses and their individual and collective strategies.

The United States

African Americans are defined, and define themselves, by "race": the colour that controls their relationships with others and creates a clear community identity that traces spatial and moral boundaries with whites. That identity is especially strong given that spatial segregation and homophilia remain the norm: despite the existence of a black middle-class, African Americans do not live in white neighbourhoods and tend to marry each other. Relationships and friendships with whites are always possible, but they do not bring down the wall between the races. Racial identity and awareness are thus a great deal stronger than self-definition by social class. In addition to this racial barrier there is a moral distance that pits the black community – united in its suffering – against the white world – selfish, cold and always racist to some degree, as highlighted by the racist police crimes mentioned by many of the interviewees. At the same time, however, African Americans feel connected to American national history and its dreams of emancipation. Pushed out of the inner circle of equality, they do not see themselves as aliens in society but rather as a community whose history forms an integral part of American national values.

While African Americans are obviously sensitive to discrimination, they are even more affected by the racist stigma, incidents and accidents of everyday life. They feel underestimated, spied on and misunderstood. When the boundaries between communities are very marked and everyone feels part of a history ranging from slavery to the civil rights movement and the Jim Crow laws, individuals – particularly men and the middle classes – choose confrontation. Half of them respond to attitudes and comments they consider racist through conflict and a demand for an explanation. The rest bite their tongue or choose to withdraw. However, most of them continue to believe in the American dream and the ideal of a multiracial society. They believe in affirmative action policies but show less support for redistribution policies.

Nevertheless, this historical awareness and understanding of community and race does not lead individuals to call for or join a social movement. On the contrary, Michèle Lamont and her colleagues highlight the influence of a repertoire of action they call neoliberal. The American dream is not so much one of a collective emancipation as a search for personal success through work: "I like people that want to get out and do something for themselves [...]. I just can't deal with beggars." It is important to do one's job and be independent, even if this

means criticising one's own community[2]; also to be capable of showing self-discipline in order to deserve the respect one demands. Because African Americans suffer greater injustice, they perceive themselves as being more moral than whites, who are obsessed with power and the illusion of their own superiority. Ultimately, individuals turn the neoliberal repertoire of success and merit against the injustices they suffer. As Michèle Lamont writes, "This is both the grandeur and the tragedy of the American collective imaginary"[3]: the grandeur of a dream of emancipation, and a tragedy for those who have been left on the side of the road.

Brazil

The survey conducted in Rio de Janeiro among blacks and mixed-race *pretos* and *pardos* reveals a situation that differs significantly from that of the United States. Although "race" and phenotype are still a key factor in discrimination and stigma, the ethnic mix and the structure of inequalities in Brazil make the boundaries between groups far more blurred. The theme of racial democracy has established itself as a national narrative[4], and class position and inequality transcend racial boundaries, at least in the collective imagination. For many blacks and mixed-race Brazilians, social inequality goes deeper than mere racial identity in a society that is keen to portray itself as the product of an ancient melting pot. Its history of slavery, different from that of the United States, and the brutality of its social inequality result in a porous representation of relations between communities. Despite extreme social and spatial inequalities, spatial/racial segregation is seen as being less severe than in the United States. Furthermore, blacks and mixed-race Brazilians are considered to be the heart of national popular culture: "We are all a little bit black". Racial tensions are also perceived to be relatively mild, while manifestations of social contempt and moral stigmatisation are taken to be much more violent. In plain terms, from the actors' point of view the social structure in Brazil is cruelly unequal, whereas social interaction between black, mixed-race and white groups is relatively calm – in comparison with the United States, that is.

Whereas Americans opt for confrontation in the incidents they experience in daily life, Brazilians tend to avoid conflict, preferring to bite their tongue and not respond. It should also be noted that manifestations of racism appear more "subtle" and ambiguous than in the United States, because the subordinate groups in Brazil are supposed to believe in the same narrative of racial democracy as the dominant groups. This multiracial ideal and people's keen awareness of social inequalities soften the harshness of race relations. Moreover, Brazilian victims of racial discrimination and stigmatisation make a clear call for social redistribution policies over various affirmative action measures. In a less unequal multiracial society, each individual is able to find his or her place.

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[2] M. Lamont, C. Fleming, "Everyday Antiracism. Competence and Religion in the Cultural Repertoire of African-American Elite and Working Class", *Du Bois Review*, 2005, vol. 1, n° 2 pp 29-43.

[3] "Réactions à la discrimination et résilience sociale dans le néolibéralisme", in F. Dubet (ed.), *Inégalités et justice sociale*, Paris, La Découverte, 2014, p. 169-188.

[4] Cf. the pivotal work on this question: G. Freyre, *Maîtres et esclaves*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974 (1933).

Israel

The section of *Getting Respect* that focuses on Israel seems somewhat uneven in relation to the rest of the book, in that the survey was conducted among three groups: Israeli Arabs, Jews of Ethiopian origin and the Mizrahim, Jews who came from the Middle East during the Israeli-Arab conflicts. The situation for these three groups is very different, however.

Israeli Arab citizens (around 20% of the population) are severely segregated, and above all are considered second-class citizens and enemies of the state by their Israeli compatriots, while at the same time they are seen as traitors by the Palestinians. Sharing a language and religion with the enemy creates an insurmountable barrier that separates them from society, while they cannot be characterised by "race" or phenotype. Relations with Israelis are always troubled and potentially violent depending on the political situation. Personal relationships are therefore a source of conflict, with many interviewees choosing confrontation or withdrawal over compromise. Unable to draw support from the Israeli national narrative, they appeal to universal rights and their religious identity, whether Muslim or Christian, in order to protect themselves against hostile behaviour. They remain exiles within the state and choose to resist and earn respect by working and succeeding in business and education.

Meanwhile, Ethiopian Jews, the Falachas, are citizens with full rights. However, they are severely discriminated against as black victims of everyday racism. They also remain segregated in housing and employment. Aware of their own marginalisation and frequently scorned, they usually choose confrontation because they feel Jewish and have chosen to live in Israel. They resist racism in the name of Zionism, the Israeli melting pot and their experience of exile.

Finally, the case of the Mizrahim does not seem to quite fit the model, because one cannot truly speak of segregation or discrimination with regard to them, even if they feel they are victims of the contempt of European Jews, who occupy the highest positions in society and do not hold their "Arab-looking" compatriots in very high esteem. They are deeply attached to the Zionist national model, using confrontation as a response to the hostility they encounter and choosing the neoliberal repertoire of personal success, because, from their point of view, the Mizrahim do not form a community on account of their diverse origins.

Sources of resilience

This presentation of *Getting Respect* is no doubt too simple and rigid: the individuals' experiences of discrimination are always specific and the strategies they choose are always

diverse. Put simply, the comparisons made in the book highlight the fact that certain repertoires of action, such as confrontation or withdrawal, are more likely in certain contexts and the disparities observed are clear enough to decisively confirm the theory that cultural and social models influence individual experiences. This is particularly true considering that the 450 interviews conducted in three countries were subject to the same research protocol and the same data processing. The social and political history of each country, the national collective imagination and the narratives that societies create have a profound impact on individuals' subjectivity, not as ideological topoi but, on a much deeper level, as repertoires, ways of defining oneself, seeing the social world and responding to ordeals.

Getting Respect is not only a brilliant example of comparative sociology. It is also a reflection on processes of resilience and self-construction in the face of injustice, contempt and belittling. The cultural repertoires to which individuals refer are tools for resistance and a way of making sense of social life and developing their self-worth. They give moral grandeur to those who might otherwise be destroyed by racism and exclusion. National myths and the history of discriminated communities play a key part in these repertoires, because they form a far more solid basis from which to demand respect and equality than merely appealing to the universal principle of basic equality for all. They are particularly effective because these repertoires and myths are part of people's shared representations, and the societies studied cannot directly challenge them [5]. However, people's recourse to the American dream, Brazilian racial democracy and Zionism and their calls for a collective struggle are now being offset by what the authors of *Getting Respect* call the neoliberal repertoire: the affirmation of personal merit and success through work, study and self-control. Is this neoliberal repertoire as new as the authors suggest? It seems unlikely if one is familiar with the powerful narratives of success that have accompanied the history of all migrations, including that of the internal migrations that pushed the blacks of Brazil and the United States out of the plantation economy and drove them towards the city and industrial society.

It is hard to read *Getting Respect* without wondering where France would stand in this comparison. What repertoires and forms of resilience have developed there? It is unlikely that one would find a hegemonic repertoire in a country whose history is so diverse and where the situations experienced by discriminated minority groups are so wide-ranging. One might also consider that France's colonial past, the role of religious identification – whether real or presumed – and the legacy of the "indifferent to differences" approach taken by socialists and republicans alike when dealing with problems of discrimination and recognition might have played a part in shaping the country's fragmented landscape. In France, however, much like in the other societies studied by Michèle Lamont and her colleagues, the future of the neoliberal repertoire seems bright: members of cultural minorities and those with a foreign parent believe more than other French people in the virtues of the market, enterprise and individual success[6]. The fact is that discrimination always denies individual merit, and thus the most immediate

[5] The election of Donald Trump and the populist wave in Brazil and Israel, and elsewhere in the world, could, however, offset this relative optimism.

[6] M. Forsé, O. Galland, C. Guibet Lafaye, M. Parodi, *L'égalité, une passion française ?*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2013.

repertoire of action encourages people to assert their own worth rather than counting on support from their group.

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