Cultural narratives and their social supports, or: sociology as a team sport

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Commentary for Lamont M. 2019 “From ‘having’ to ‘being’: self-worth and the current crisis of American society” for British Journal of Sociology DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12667

An invitation to a public cultural sociology

On 15 January 2019, along with millions of people around the world, I was watching the live stream from the British House of Commons. Collectively, we saw the spectacle unfold. Parliamentarians shouting, booing, cheering and leering. Emotional speeches for and against the EU, Britain and Brexit, especially this Brexit. The Speaker of the House shouting ‘Order! Order!’; instantly becoming an Internet meme. Finally, we watched as MPs crammed into one crowded and another rather empty hall, posting illicit group selfies on Twitter, as Prime Minister Theresa May’s Brexit deal, for which she had negotiated for almost two years, was voted down. Which was exactly the outcome that everybody knew was coming. So why was I watching? Why were we all watching?

There are many possible answers to this. The appeal of a good tragedy, promising to end with a stage strewn with corpses, the chorus lamenting human hubris. The effectiveness of a well-hyped global media event. The possibility to watch one of the fateful moments of twenty-first century. But having just read ‘From “having” to “being”’, Michèle Lamont’s inspiring BJS lecture, I think that an important reason for the global appeal of the Brexit saga is that it dramatizes the ‘diagnosis’ of the socio-cultural crisis that Lamont describes in her lecture. The anguish and anger of the increasingly uncertain, precarious, unrecognized ‘bottom half’, causing political instability and polarization – though not without the help from politicians, journalists and opinion makers who converted anguish into votes. The exhausted upper-middle classes, glued to their screens in their comfortable but heavily mortgaged homes, still shaken about the discovery that cultural hegemony does not make electoral majority. The
A sharp drawing of social boundaries against all sorts of outsiders and so-called undeserving groups. But especially: the lack of coherent narratives, and the jarring absence of hope from the narratives provided by right, left, and middle. The trumping of so-called rational economic or material arguments by cultural and symbolic considerations: values, belonging, community, worth, and recognition. The Brexit crisis highlights that the contemporary social crisis, while rooted in widening economic divides, is also a crisis of cultural meaning-making.

The Brexit debate seems to me like a ‘ritual of division’, maybe even an ‘anti-ritual’ (Douglas 1968, Van Gennep 2013[1901]). Rituals (as all sociologists know) unite people by mutual alignment, synchronized activity, and joint focus on shared symbols (Alexander 2004; Collins 2004). Both in the House of Commons and in the global media event (Dayan and Katz 1994), there was alignment, joint focus, synchronized activity, and shared symbols. As rituals are wont to do, it captured the essence of the situation: fragmentation. Mary Douglas called such occurrences anti-rituals: ritualized moments dramatizing socio-cultural inconsistencies and divides. While possibly divisive in content, they can be helpful in joining people in considering what is at stake. This particular anti-ritual even created a new symbol: a small man in a big chair, shouting ‘Order order!’ We were all watching as the British MPs enacted the great drama that affects not only the US but also the UK and most of (Western) Europe: how failing cultural narratives contribute to social crisis.

Lamont’s lecture offers a grim diagnosis of the ‘ravaging effects of neoliberalism’, but also presents hopeful possibilities for a way forward. She proposes to look for new narratives to ‘broaden cultural membership’, create new ‘scripts of the self’, and ‘reframe’ stigmatized groups, and offers several suggestions for such narratives. This is a bold move in cultural sociology, a rather academic subdivision of sociology that – at least in the US context – typically steers clear of public interventions. Lamont’s lecture, moreover, is neither critical sociology nor policy advice, but something different: a new cultural public sociology (Burawoy 2005), or maybe a public cultural sociology.

I have read Lamont’s lecture as an invitation: a call to sociologists to think through possibilities for creating and sustaining new cultural narratives, and to use sociological tools and insights to make these possibilities into realities. This invitation promises to offer a way out of the deadlock between ‘critical’ sociologists with ‘critical’ methodologies and more academic or ‘professional’ sociologists who steer clear of social commentary, or strictly separate their professional and political personas.

Critique is the classical genre of public intellectuals and engaged academics. The emblematic critical sociologist is Pierre Bourdieu, as he was portrayed in the documentary Sociology is a combat sport (La sociologie est un sport the combat, 2001): the heroic, individual thinker-cum-fighter who uncovers hidden mechanisms, points out systemic flaws and injustices, speaks truth to power. But critique has lost its clout, ‘run out of steam’ as another heroic
thinker/fighter, Bruno Latour (2004), phrased it. To many within academia, critique increasingly feels like a tired game, a trick every second-year student knows. Within the social sciences, there is a growing polarity between ‘critical’ scholars with ‘critical methodologies’, and more ‘professional’ academics who try to refrain from engagement, or carefully separate their academic and professional personas. (As a relative outsider, this polarity strikes me as especially marked in the UK, where it appears to overlap with a methodological divide).

Simultaneously, outside the university, critique has run rampant. In the Internet era, the techniques of critique have been democratized to the point that most people easily expose the interest behind the seemingly disinterested and the power play behind every claim to truth. In the course of this democratization, moreover, these techniques of critique have broadened their allegiances. For decades, critique belonged to the left. Today, the strategies of critique are everywhere, but adopted most uncompromisingly by the new right (e.g., ‘fake news’, ‘the liberal media’).

Lamont’s work offers a way out of this deadlock. She presents a sociology that is rooted in rigorous research, yet at the same time it is relevant and engaged. As in traditional critical approaches, it challenges accepted understandings, arguing that inequality and exclusion are cultural rather than exclusively economic or structural. But Lamont moves beyond critique, looking to use sociological insights to create new, viable and inclusive ways of meaning making. This is an ambitious programme, with big ideas and big questions. To implement this, she seeks to enlist many others: this programme requires the joining together of insights from different empirical studies and sociological subfields. Consequently, this sociology feels like a ‘team sport’ rather than a ‘combat sport’: an open-ended beginning of a new quest that can, and should, include many others.

It is in this spirit that I have written this commentary: as a response to an invitation. I discuss three questions – each of them with huge ramifications – that directly follow from the programme of creating sustainable, inclusive cultural narratives. First, what makes a cultural narrative work? Looking at older success stories might allow for a form of ‘reverse engineering’, by looking at what worked for earlier successful narratives. The second question follows from this exploration of narratives that work: how do social factors and structures support such cultural narratives? Cultural sociology as a subfield has stressed the relative autonomy of culture vis-à-vis social structure (Lamont 1992; Swidler 1986). However, durable cultural narratives need to be socially and institutionally supported. The question is how this can be done, and how it can be done best. The third question regards the scope but also the limits of Lamont’s programme. It promises to generate many new questions that many sociologists consider themselves unqualified to address. How far can, and should, sociology go in thinking through solutions for societal problems? And what to do with the questions we cannot or will not answer?
What makes cultural narratives work? And what can we learn from that?

In her lecture, Lamont offers three suggestions for building cultural narratives about ‘being’ rather than ‘having’: 1. build on a plurality of criteria of worth; 2. provide inclusive frames for stigmatized groups; and 3. highlight ordinary universalism. Drawing on a wide range of literature, she identifies various causal pathways towards making these narratives work. I would like to push this line of reasoning further by proposing a strategy of ‘reverse engineering’: look for what worked earlier, identify why it works, and then translate this to another context. To move forwards I suggest a step back to look for existing successful cases (cf. Hall and Lamont 2009).

Take the notion of ordinary universalism: the strengthening of everyday cultural beliefs about human connectedness and similarity like ‘we are all children of God’ or ‘we all spend nine months in our mother’s womb’ (Lamont 2000). While heartening, I doubt that such statements are of much help in polarized situations like the Brexit debate, or even in the more mundane context of family gatherings ruined by political divides (where people actually have spent nine months in the same womb). Moreover, Lamont’s suggestions for fostering these universal narratives are rather unspecific: do more research, then incorporate these research findings into political discourse.

In comes ‘reverse engineering’. It seems to me that many expressions of ordinary universalism echo religious, humanistic or spiritual discourses. While I would not recommend re-secularization, religion is a useful analogy: arguably the most successful generator of narratives about social worth related to ‘being’ rather than ‘having’ (Calvinism being the notable exception). This comparison offers insights into the content of successful narratives (e.g., universal claims, creates community, promises salvation, rejects or counters worldly moralities) but also how these narratives can be spread and fortified. Religious beliefs generally rely on rituals and symbols to anchor them, and on stories bringing moral lessons to life fostering identification and empathy. A vast literature in psychology, literary studies and neurology has established the effectiveness of story-telling, especially fiction, for developing empathy (Keen 2006, 2018; Mar, Oatley and Peterson 2009). This might be a feasible strategy to promote moral universalism. Academically, it might lead to alliances with cultural scholars, neuropsychologists and psychologists of emotion rather than social psychologists with their investment in human ‘tribalism’. Practically, this angle suggests it might be more fruitful to work with media, cultural industries, artists and celebrities, and with schools and educational organizations, than with politicians or policy makers. Reverse engineering might also be used to identify risks and pitfalls of various strategies. I will not discuss these here, but I trust that possible downsides of religion are well known.

The American dream is the classic example of a successful cultural narrative. Lamont’s summary of this dream is practically a recipe: it gave ‘American...
citizens a sense of normative direction . . . (towards building prosperity), standards by which to determine who belongs (the materially/professionally successful), and a notion of who deserves our trust (those who try) and of which groups deserve to be stigmatized (those who are lazy and lack self-reliance)' Lamont (2019). While it became 'impoverished' (Lamont 2019) in neoliberal times, this narrative entailed ‘the promise of equal opportunity and social inclusion’ (Lamont 2019). Reverse-engineered, Lamont’s diagnosis is this: what works is a consistent moral framework of social and personal worth, with believable claims of universality that give hope to all.

It is informative to compare this American dream with the markedly different ‘European dreams’ when Western Europe, like the US, entered a period of unprecedented growth and upward mobility. These countries were more homogeneous, but generally lacked an overarching cultural narrative: there are no British, Dutch, French or Danish dreams comparable to the American one. European narratives of social worth and recognition are rooted in strong states with extensive, though declining, welfare policies (Esping-Andersen 1996; Mijs, Bakhtiari and Lamont 2016; Oorschot, Opielka and Pfau-Effinger 2008). Instead of individual effort and achievement, welfare state narratives stress solidarity and security. The ‘peace of mind of the welfare state’ (Stolk and Wouters 1983) made it easier to uncouple virtue from achievement. Across Western Europe, we therefore see a variation of ‘orders of worth’ (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) unrelated to economic success. For instance, culture and sophistication are important European categories, but especially pronounced in Germany and France (Janssen, Verboord and Kuipers 2011). Welfare states have also fostered moralities based on care: a feminist version in the Nordic countries, and a more gender-specific version in conservative welfare states like the Netherlands and Germany (Grunow and Evertsen 2016).

Western Europe is therefore an interesting laboratory to think through the emergence of different criteria of worth. However, I am hesitant to identify these as societies with plurality of criteria of worth in Lamont’s sense. First, these plural criteria of worth are embedded in hierarchical social systems, and the ‘orders of worth’ themselves are differently valuated. Achievement is a central criterion of worth especially in the (upper) middle classes. Good taste trumps religiosity. Moralities of care are for women, not for men. Thus, in these plural logics, the upper-middle classes, men, and also (white) ‘natives’ still emerge as hegemonic.

Second, Western European plurality is embedded in national communities with strong group boundaries. As with the American dream, the downsides of the European welfare dreams became most apparent when the cracks appeared after neoliberal ‘welfare state retrenchment’ (Schumacher, Vis and Kersbergen 2013). In welfare states, the nation provides both social solidarity and cultural meaning; national belonging has become entangled with moral deservingness (Koster, van der Achterberg and Waal 2013; Larsen and Dejgaard
The hardening of welfare state policies went hand in hand with a strengthening of social boundaries against immigrants and ethnic minorities but also against the European Union (Duyvendak, Geschiere and Tonkens 2016; Mijs et al. 2016; Schumacher et al. 2013). In this light, it is unsurprising that many Brits support Brexit against their economic (often described as ‘real’) interest. They opted for the strongest cultural narrative, incidentally proving Lamont’s (2018) point that a cultural resource like ‘recognition’ is at least as strong a motivation as economic arguments. However, in contrast with the American dream, this is not a story of individual worth and achievement, but a narrative of ‘groupness’ (Lamont et al. 2016).

What can we ‘reverse engineer’ from these stories? First, universalist cultural narratives exist, but they (still) create groups and group boundaries. Of the three narratives that Lamont proposes, universalism therefore strikes me as the most difficult. Second, pluralities of worth can be successfully created and sustained. However, they may reinforce hierarchies, or require a more fixed moral and social ‘baseline’. Third, both the European and American narratives provided openings for stigmatized groups. The American dream allowed for the inclusion of racial minorities and immigrants. Welfare state moralities have enabled destigmatization of unemployment and poverty; and (with notable cross-national variations) of migrants. However, the question arises whether the three types of narrative Lamont aims to build are compatible. They can all exist, within the right context – but can they co-exist? Or is there a trade-off between universalism, inclusivity and plurality?

How do social factors and structures support cultural narratives? And which ones to focus on?

Looking at the success of previous narratives brings out the importance of social factors for building and sustaining narratives: dreams require institutions to spread their stories, economic structures to reward virtue, rituals to reaffirm moral boundaries. This brings me to the second question: How do social factors and structures support cultural narratives? Here, the astounding size of Lamont’s programme becomes manifest: the spreading and sustaining of cultural messages is studied in fields ranging from cultural sociology to sociology of religion, from anthropology to science studies, from advertising to media studies and media psychology, from management to global studies, from education to politics to social movement studies. The question about social supports for cultural narratives therefore seems more strategic than academic: where to start? How to choose?

Lamont starts from contemporary (American) cultural, political and organizational sociology, and zooms in on institutions, social movements, and diffusion processes as central factors in spreading and sustaining cultural narratives.
I find, however, that there is an interesting omission in her discussion of these factors: struggle. It seems to me inevitable that the social spreading of new cultural narratives will be met with resistance and contestation. Narratives will need to be defended and legitimized, and this will require reason, talk, policy and role models, but also conflict and confrontation. Take two of Lamont’s examples: the athletes in the National Football Team protesting against racism, and the #metoo protests in popular culture. Although happening in nominally non-political fields, these attempts to change cultural imaginaries have caused intense conflict and contestation. Albeit politely, academically and constructively – Lamont is in effect proposing a culture war.

Although I appreciate the upbeat spirit of Lamont’s lecture, I find it therefore curious that the lecture contains no words like ‘fight’ or ‘struggle’ and only one mention of an (uphill) ‘battle’, not against people, groups or organizations but against ‘cultural obstacles’. Social movements are described as consisting of ‘leaders’, ‘actors’ and ‘activists’, but in the end these people engage in struggle, even if these struggles today are mostly symbolic and non-violent. Upward and downward diffusion are rarely gentle processes. Diffusion typically moves along lines of social domination and subordination. Downward diffusion typically involves at least some symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), if not ‘civilizing offensives’ (Kuipers 2013) or outright cultural imperialism; while upward diffusion is either connected to emancipation movements or to cultural appropriation (Mennell 2007).

Assuming that one doesn’t want to become an activist, or neo-Marxist, neo-Bourdiesian or post-structuralist critical scholar, how to engage with the more bellicose aspects of effecting cultural change? There are several recent research traditions where conflict is conceptualized as (also) productive and creative (without reducing them to one-dimensional social struggles). Europeans like to complain that aversion to power and struggle is a structural flaw of American sociology, but the mostly American field of social movement studies has been very successful at conceptualizing social conflict as simultaneous cultural, emotional, constructive and political – and sometimes quite violent (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2009). Conflict and contestation are also conceptualized as a productive socio-cultural force in recent ‘pragmatist’ approaches, like French pragmatist sociology (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) or Actor-Network Theory, with its ‘dogma’ that all production of meaning is seen as situated and essentially contested gaining a lot of traction since Web 2.0 (Law 2017).

In addition to the institutions, social movements and diffusion processes – with or without struggle – many social factors can be identified as important for supporting and sustaining cultural narratives. First, the creation of narratives depends to some extent on material conditions. Arguably, both the American dream and the narratives of the European welfare states have benefited greatly from a long run of economic growth. However, other narratives appear
to have sprung from decline. For instance, the rise of a new non-materialist moral narratives among some contemporary young people (Lamont 2019), such as the cult of the vintage, may be a rather hopeful result of growing up in times of crisis.

Importantly, building cultural narratives requires some sort of infrastructure for exchange between institutions or fields. Lamont identifies many actors that may be involved in creating and spreading new narratives; I can easily think of more. But ‘planting’ narratives in various institutions is not enough. In liberal democracies, a public domain along the lines of Habermas’s idealtype of the public sphere is the classical way to organize exchange between domains (Habermas 1991). However, alternative (less attractive) models have been suggested and tried: the state, religion, the market and/or specific for-profit organizations. In the contemporary US, there is cause for concern regarding the functioning of this public sphere. This raises the question how to best facilitate the spreading of narratives through American society at large, and leads us to even more academic fields: democratic theory and political communication.

Finally, ritual seems to me an especially promising factor for creating and fortifying cultural narratives. I started this commentary with a mass-mediated event with a strong ritual character: the Brexit debate. This event amplified and created meanings and symbols, uniting Brits (and others) in considering what is at stake. My main point here is that even a social ritual that dramatizes conflict can be productive because it puts people ‘on the same page’. Many mass mediated rituals can go further than that and actually create a sense of community and shared meaning, even in anonymous masses. Rituals have been indispensable in forging nation states, simultaneously connecting people and creating a joint imaginary.

Thus, rituals are important bridges between the social and the cultural. This insight can be put to much practical use in fortifying cultural narratives. Rituals can mark social recognition – the central cultural ‘resource’ (Lamont 2018) – and in the process promote ‘scripts of the self’ in interaction and in large mediated events. In US culture, sports events, television shows and popular music performances are important mass rituals. They have had great significance for the production of inclusive frames especially for racial minorities. Such ritual events may also promote ‘ordinary universalism’ by fostering identification with people with very different lives. The ritualized recognition of various forms of worth by institutions, officials or celebrities might be an effective way of stimulating plurality of worth. A focus on ritual would also correct the rather cognitive bias of cultural-institutional sociology, by bringing emotions back in. Rituals or ritual-like events also are important conduits for emotions, which can ‘charge’ cultural narratives with positive or negative affect making them more salient and thus stronger. Finally, while rituals or ritual-like mediated events may dramatize conflict, they can also curb conflict or dramatize reconciliation. Think of German chancellor Helmut Kohl and French president
Francois Mitterrand holding hands at the World War I memorial in Verdun. This came to symbolize ‘no more European wars’, one of the central narratives of the EU – though increasingly crowded out by economic narratives that have failed to convince many.

**How far can, and should, sociology go in thinking through solutions for societal problems?**

Lamont strikes a careful balance between normative and academic approaches. Starting from a research-based ‘diagnosis’, she identifies normative goals, and then analyses and identifies academic ways to achieve these goals. This is a productive strategy with the potential to win over many people, including scholars who are wary of social interventions. However, it also raises question about the limits of this programme, and of sociological interventions generally: how far can, and should, sociology go in trying to solve societal problems?

Once the first normative step has been taken, many of the next steps also involve considerations where a neutral academic habitus is of little help. Lamont’s programme generates many strategic questions: Who to work with? Which academic fields to engage with? What social factors to focus on? What societal fields and institutions to focus on? What stakeholders to work with? How to convince people? What allies to choose – and therefore: whom to alienate or oppose? These are all strategic choices. The criteria for making these decisions are partly normative. Thus, once normative considerations have entered the equation, they will remain part of this equation.

This is hardly a new insight. The ‘creep’ of normative thinking is an important reason why many social scientists avoid it. However, given the current social situation and sociologists’ obvious expertise in social and cultural matters, this is an unsatisfactory option. The alternative (implicit in Lamont’s lecture, more explicit in her other recent work) is to push forward, while continuously thinking through the moral and political ramifications of one’s choices. Note that this will require a continuous reflection on what sort of questions we consider outside of our jurisdiction.

Fortunately, I think academic sociology has something to offer here. The question of moral tensions, contradictions and limits in the creation of new narratives could become the basis of a new research programme. I could imagine fascinating research projects on, for instance, the upper limits of recognition. We know the negative consequences of lack of recognition, but is there such a thing as too much recognition? (cf. van Krieken 2018) And what about the moral and social limits of plural of criteria of worth? How much plurality is enough? How much plurality is possible? Are there conflicting ‘doxas’, toxic sources of worth, or insatiable or destabilizing quests for recognition? How have people coped in such constellations? Such considerations can be
reformulated into empirical research questions, which may feed into more strategic decisions and recommendations.

Existing research might offer strategic cases for exploring the moral conundrums of introducing and sustaining new cultural narratives and ‘scripts of the self’, and the solutions that people have come up with. For instance, I have written about attempts in the beauty industry to introduce more inclusive beauty standards, in terms of race, ethnicity and gender. This shows how a commercialized industry may successfully push inclusive ‘frames’ for stigmatized groups (Kuipers, Chow and Laan 2014). However, this widening of frames happens in the context of restrictive and unhealthy beauty standards. People in the industry are struggling with this contradiction, but reported that – according to industry logics – these widened frames required inflexibility elsewhere. Regardless of whether this is true or not, such cases illustrate the moral and strategic issues that people encounter in trying to change cultural narratives and frames.

However, these strategic and moral questions will only become truly apparent with the implementation of this programme. The university is a good place to generate and discuss ideas about narratives, frames and scripts of the self – but the production of these narratives, scripts and frames will have to happen elsewhere. If Lamont’s ambitions become reality, this programme will eventually leave the halls of academia. This will necessarily involve conversations with many others, including many non-academics who have no qualms whatsoever about making moral and strategic decisions. For professional sociologists, this may be the true moral challenge: to release their ideas into the wild to let them roam free.

**Conclusion: sociology as a team sport**

I have read Lamont’s lecture as an invitation: a call to sociologists to think through possibilities for creating and sustaining new cultural narratives, and to use sociological tools and insights to create new, viable and inclusive ways of meaning making. In this commentary I have focused on three questions that directly follow from this programme of creating sustainable, inclusive cultural narratives. First, what makes a cultural narrative work? Second: how do social factors and structures support such cultural narratives? Third: How far can, and should, sociology go in thinking through solutions for societal problems?

Taken together, these questions illustrate the daunting scope and ambition of the programme presented by Lamont. Like the building of new cultural narratives, building a public cultural sociology will require considerable social support. It will require sustained collaboration within and across sociology, inside and outside academia. And in this process, it will keep generating more
questions, including questions many sociologists may not feel qualified to answer.

Therefore, I see Lamont’s programme as a call for ‘sociology as a team sport’. Sociology is a collective effort that cannot rely exclusively on heroic thinkers or excellent researchers. The point of a team sport is not only to win, but also to produce a gratifying experience for all participants, including the losing team and the public. Moreover, what a team sport can do is draw together many different people, from many different backgrounds. The important thing is not that they are all on the same side – but that they agree, if only for a while, on what is at stake.

(Date accepted: February 2019)

Notes

1. This point was forcefully made in a column by Gary Younge (2013): ‘Many working-class leavers were not motivated by self-interest, but by values. Well-off liberals who back tax rises should understand that. (...) Our challenge is not to mock, but to tell a better story. One that includes them, has a future for all of us and, ultimately, turns “them” and “us” into “we”.

2. In the English translation, the film is generally known as ‘Sociology is a martial art’, which has subtly different connotations.

3. As I have argued elsewhere (Kuipers 2014), this is also the result of the particular nature of the vulgarized ‘textbook versions’ of critical thinkers like Bourdieu, Foucault, Butler, Marcuse, etc. These textbook versions supplant critique as a conduit of doubt and generator of questions, with critique as a collection of statements and rather fixed insights (‘knowledge is power’; ‘gender is a performance’).

4. I am indebted to Annemarie Mol for various discussions about ‘reverse engineering’. This notion is rooted (of course) in engineering, but has also gained traction in the move towards ‘design thinking’ in urban planning and policy making, and in science and technology studies (De Laet and Mol 1992). An interesting combination of a social science and technological approach to reverse engineering can be found in Gehl (1996).

5. A burning issue in all major news outlets in the holiday season, see for instance https://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/22/health/thanksgiving-holiday-conversation-survival-guide-trnd/index.html. https://www.vogue.com/article/thanksgiving-post-election-how-to-survive

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