Seeing Others by Michèle Lamont

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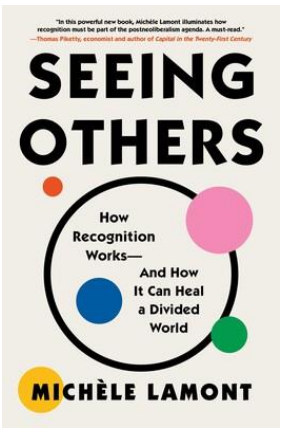

Book Review: *Seeing Others*
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With *Seeing Others: How Recognition Works – and How it Can Heal a Divided World* (Simon & Schuster 2023), Harvard sociologist Michèle Lamont brings her nearly 40 years of expertise into the public sphere. Sociological scholarship and public policy tend to focus on reducing inequality in the distribution of material resources. In *Seeing Others*, Lamont implores a wider audience to tackle the equally pressing task of increasing recognition, defined as "acknowledging people's existence and positive worth, actively making them feel visible and valued, reducing their marginalization, and openly integrating them into a group" (4). At its core, *Seeing Others* argues that we must collectively institute a politics of recognition and create new narratives that empower and dignify groups who have been historically stigmatized. For Lamont, it is only by instituting a new politics of recognition that efforts to ameliorate inequalities in material conditions will take full effect.

Over the course of ten succinct chapters, Lamont charts a path toward a more inclusive society. *Seeing Others* begins by devoting the first four chapters to establishing the case for increasing "recognition." She argues that neoliberal economic policies and their corresponding social changes have worsened living conditions for almost all social groups. Here, Lamont is at her finest, skillfully wielding empirical evidence from her complete oeuvre and the work of other social scientists. Every sentence is supported with strong evidence, leaving perhaps even a skeptical general reader thoroughly convinced.

The next third of *Seeing Others*, Chapters 4 through Chapter 7, introduce us to her new data: 185 interviews with "change agents" who are "cultural entrepreneurs who intentionally aim to transform how we perceive others" (62) and 80 interviews with Gen Z college students from the Northeast and Midwest regions of the United States. Scholars will appreciate the rather unusual accompanying methods appendices that identify change agents by name. The datasets were well chosen to address the research questions. Change agents occupy a wide variety of industries and are notably *not* politicians, and yet their media narratives are consumed by millions of Americans, while Gen Z college students help highlight the nascent beginnings of new systems of worth. Much like the working-class portrayed in *The Dignity of Working Men* (Lamont 2000), the change agents and college respondents place tremendous weight on defining their identity and self-worth on being "morally good" people. Data featuring change agents are especially striking in this regard –

they do not, for the most part, define themselves by their material success and high-status social networks. Instead, they articulate narratives that center their efforts to portray stigmatized communities with dignity and complexity.

In the final third of *Seeing Others*, Lamont reminds us that though she has made a case for devoting new resources towards reducing inequalities in recognition gaps, these efforts must come alongside sustained movements towards reducing economic inequalities and material deprivation. Throughout, the book thoughtfully engages with the dark underbelly of social progress – as the rights of many stigmatized populations have been expanded, there have been renewed threats to reverse those gains. Some readers may argue that the book should have engaged with prominent conversative change agents more directly but as Lamont points out, much ink has been spilled on these figures elsewhere.

Cultural sociologists familiar with Lamont's body of work may find that *Seeing Others* introduces us briefly to the new data but I wish these data had a more prominent place in the book. Fortunately, numerous academic articles using these same data are being published with talented co-authors. I found myself wanting more details on the innovative concepts of "recognition chains," defined as "a network of change agents and organizations that scales up and disseminates messages of recognition" (77) as well as and the distinct strategies used by Hollywood creatives to broaden the circle of who matters. Perhaps future articles will distill these more clearly, allowing for change agents in other industries to have a playbook and create change elsewhere.

Like Lamont, I also found myself considering the limits of a politics of recognition. From whom are we seeking recognition, and under what relations of power? Are new narratives for stigmatized populations automatically emancipatory? Here, we can look not only to our familiar critics within Marxist sociology but also to the work of Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) in political science. In *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014), Coulthard draws on a case of a First Nation in Canada to argue that a state politics of recognition can reproduce colonial hierarchies in liberal democracies. A politics of recognition does not challenge social inequalities, meaning that recognition becomes another form of domination and wielding power over a stigmatized population. *Seeing Others* highlights at least one type of self-recognition where immigration activists write new narratives for stigmatized immigrant communities on their own terms, but other change agents fall into the trap of centering a politics of recognition from above. Recognizing the limitations of a politics of recognition is important for combatting purely symbolic measures and empty public statements used by institutions. A healthy politics of recognition must acknowledge the embedded power relations and simultaneously fight for the distribution of resources that accompany destigmatization.

The book is a pleasurable read for a generalist audience, deftly covering decades of literature in an accessible manner. In a discipline often dominated with works identifying sites of inequality and worsening conditions, it was refreshing to read a text that highlighted a site of potential healing. Determining "who matters" shapes the distribution of material resources, and it would behoove sociologists to more closely examine how "stigmatization, the mirror opposite of recognition" (63) can be reduced. *Seeing Others* reads like a hopeful guide, reminding us how far we've come in battling against various forms of stigmatization and giving us a pathway forward. Readers of this newsletter may not need convincing that cultural processes are an important aspect of inequality. However, by reading *Seeing Others,* we are all better equipped to convince our colleagues in other disciplines and perhaps our family members as well. The book also reads as an excellent example of what can happen with cultural sociology in the public sphere – it is receiving media coverage on various outlets like the *Brian Lehrer Show*, the *New York Times*, TED Talks, and even a "Fireside Chat" at Google. I look forward to following along as Lamont shares her work with more change agents who are in positions of power to narratives investing in new narratives of worth.