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National Identity and National Boundary Patterns in France and the United States

Michèle Lamont

Studying National Boundary Patterns

American scholars working on France have long been interested in exploring France's national identity and cultural specificity. Stanley Hoffman's classic *In Search of France* is one of the most important benchmarks in this literature.¹ More recently, social scientists have renewed their interest in these issues, exploring collective definitions of the French nation and its internal diversity,² French national identity as expressed through nationalism,³ the changing relationship between the local and the national,⁴ the identity crisis that followed the Americanization of France, increased Muslim immigration and integration, and the multiplication of transnational identities, symbolized, for example, by the European Economic Union.⁵ France's

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¹ Stanley Hoffmann et al., *In Search of France* (Cambridge 1963).

² Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, part 1 *La République*, part 2 *La Nation* (Paris 1984, 1986); Susan Carol Rogers, *Shaping Modern Times in Rural France: The Transformation and Reproduction of an Aveyronnais Community* (Princeton, N.J., 1991).

³ Anthony Smith, *National Identities* (London 1991); Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge 1992).

⁴ Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870–1914* (Stanford, 1976).

⁵ Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, Calif. 1993); Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, 1992); Yasemine Soysal, "Changing Citizenship in Europe: Remarks on Postnational Membership and the National State." Unpublished ms., Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 1994 (available from author upon request).

cultural specificity has also been scrutinized through its peculiar arrangements between the state and the market ⁶

As is increasingly the case in several fields of inquiry, along with Derrida and others, students of national identity often oppose a conception of identity as primordial and fixed in time and view it as problematic, fluid, and self-reflexive or "plural" and "decentered" ⁷ Following Schultz, many also agree that personal and collective identity are defined relationally in opposition to other meanings against which they take on their own significance ⁸ However, few ask whether identity is equally fluid for all or more fluid in some contexts than in others and whether, to what extent, and how, history, available cultural repertoires, and structural factors constrain this fluidity Furthermore, although most agree on the existence of a multiplicity of identity, many predefine specific dimensions of identity as being particularly important, notably Anthony Smith, who views national identity as the most fundamental and inclusive identity of all instead of analyzing whether, how, and when it is salient in contrast to other identity dimensions ⁹ Finally, along with postmodernists, poststructuralists, and feminists, most are concerned with collective identities, such as nation, gender, race, religion, and ethnicity, which are based on ascribed characteristics, and all neglect to analyze the relative salience of more diffused identities, such as moral character or cultural orientation

My work fills some of these lacunae Instead of presupposing the greater salience of some dimensions of identity over others, I draw on in-depth interviews to reconstruct the symbolic boundaries or mental maps through which individuals define "us" and "them," simultaneously identifying the most salient principles of classification and identification that are operating behind these definitions Thereby, through comparative analysis, I trace what I call national boundary patterns, that is, national patterns of distribution of specific crite-

⁶ Frank Dobbin, *Forging Industrial Policy United States Britain and France in the Railway Age* (New York, 1994)

⁷ For example, Sahlins, *Boundaries*, Michael Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy* (Chicago, 1992) Also Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978)

⁸ For example, R. D. Grillo, ed., *'Nation' and 'State' in Europe Anthropological Perspectives* (New York, 1980), Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, edited with an introduction by Helmut R. Wagner (Chicago, 1970) Craig Calhoun, "Social Theory and the Politics of Identity," in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, edited by Craig Calhoun (New York, 1994), 9–36, offers an excellent comparison of identity theory in sociology, poststructuralism, postmodernism, feminism, and literary criticism

⁹ Smith, *National Identities*, 143. See also Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference*, chap. 6

ria of definition and evaluation of others, including morality, socio-economic position, gender, race, and so forth. This inductive approach does not privilege bounded or diffused identities nor ascribed or achieved characteristics. Also, in contrast to the most influential frameworks used to study national cultural differences (for example, the "modal personality" and "national character" frameworks),¹⁰ this approach does not view national boundary patterns as residing in individual psychological traits. Boundaries are studied as institutionalized cultural repertoires, that is, as publicly available categorization systems, and national stereotypes as byproducts of collective processes of the definition of identity manifested in national boundary patterns. The result is both a multifaceted theory of status that centers on the relationship between various standards of evaluation within national repertoires and a comparative sociology of models of inclusion/exclusion, that is, of the relative salience of various bases of societal segmentations. This approach is illustrated herein with a summary of results from previous research on the French and American upper middle class, and by a more extensive description of aspects of the boundary work of randomly sampled French and American low-status white collar workers residing in the suburbs of Paris and New York.¹¹

National contexts constitute useful culturally differentiated laboratories for the study of symbolic boundaries because salient high-status signals are best illuminated by contrast. Comparing national contexts allows one to trace empirically how class, race, and gender are used in assessments of people's worth and how particularistic and universalistic characteristics are used publicly to justify judgments about others.¹² One can also explore cross-nationally the kinds of inferences that people make about moral character based on socio-economic status or how morality is assessed.¹³

¹⁰ Alex Inkeles, 'Continuity and Change in the American National Character,' in *The Third Century: America as a Post-Industrial Society*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (Stanford, Calif. 1979), Lawrence Wylie, *Village in the Vaucluse* (Cambridge, 1973), Hoffmann et al., *In Search of France*, and Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago, 1964).

¹¹ By boundary work, I refer to the process by which individuals define who they are by opposition to others and to traits associated with others. This use of the term differs from that of Tom Gieryn who refers to "boundary work" to describe how scientific disciplines compete for resources at the organizational level by increasing their sphere of competence. See Tom Gieryn, "Boundary Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists," *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983) 781-95.

¹² Particularly useful on this topic is the work of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot, *De la justification: Les Économies de la grandeur* (Paris, 1991).

¹³ This approach also documents definitions of the French and American imagined community, that is, of the moral, cultural, and other traits that make it possible to be recognized as

Comparisons between France and the United States can be particularly fruitful because the relationships between public and private, between political, moral, and religious realms, and between the individual and the collectivity are so different in the French and American contexts. As such, these cases facilitate the identification of strongly contrasted models of evaluation. A nonnegligible part of the recent comparative research on France and the United States has been structural in focus and has emphasized institutional and politicoeconomic factors. More attention needs to be paid to cultural repertoires per se, including national boundary patterns, and to the ways in which they are constrained and shaped by structural arrangements and alternative cultural repertoires. Moreover, national boundary patterns provide a useful lens to look at a neglected dimension of national identity without flattening the cultural distinctiveness of various national subgroups, because subnational boundary patterns can also lend themselves to examination.

My earlier research on the French and American upper middle class focused on the boundary work produced by symbolic communities, that is, by groups of individuals who are socially defined as showing a certain symbolic cohesion and as having at their disposal similar categorization systems to differentiate between insiders and outsiders as well as common vocabularies and symbols through which they create a shared identity (in this case, French *cadres* and middle-class Americans)¹⁴ I documented empirically how members of these groups value specific dimensions of identity and analyzed these evaluative frameworks as illustrative of aspects of national cultural repertoires that exist to a certain extent (to be assessed empirically from group to group) above specific contexts, because they are transportable from one situation to the next (although enacted in context). These symbolic boundaries are determined over time by both the supply side of culture (the macrocultural repertoires that

a fellow citizen in these countries, as one toward whom others have a sense of communality and responsibility. As Jeffrey Alexander writes, "members of national communities often believe that 'the world,' and this notably includes their own nation, is filled with people who either do not deserve freedom and communal support or are not capable of sustaining them (in part because they are immoral egoists). Members of national communities do not want to 'save' such persons. They do not wish to include them, protect them, or offer them rights because they conceive them as being unworthy, amoral, and in some sense 'uncivilized'." Jeffrey Alexander, "Citizens and Enemies as Symbolic Classification: On the Polarizing Discourse of Civil Society" in *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, ed. Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier (Chicago, 1992), 291.

¹⁴ Michele Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class* (Chicago, 1994). On symbolic communities, see Joseph Gusfield, *Communities* (Chicago, 1975).

are made available to people) and the factors that make individuals more likely to draw on some dimensions of these repertoires rather than others (these factors include the broad characteristics of the society in which they live and the structural characteristic of their own social position as well)

Space limitations prevent me from discussing how context, cultural repertoires, and structural factors combine to affect the salience of various dimensions of identity.¹⁵ Instead, in the following pages I show that some dimensions of identity are more salient in the boundary work of French and American low-status white collar workers, contributing indirectly to the understanding of both French and American identity and cultural distinctiveness. Again, to identify how French and Americans evaluate the worth of others, I focus on how symbolic boundaries are drawn—how we separate “us” from “them” or whom we identify ourselves with and against. I am particularly concerned with the various types of superiority that people operate with and how they hierarchalize others on these bases. Along these lines, I asked the men to describe their friends and foes, role models and heroes, and likes and dislikes. In so doing, I tap the criteria that are the basis of their evaluations and self-identity and reveal the natural order through which they hierarchalize others, as when they declare that, of course, it is more important to be honest than refined or that money is not a good indicator of the value of a person. I used this method to study the main boundaries that are drawn by French and American low-status white collar and upper-middle-class men residing in the suburbs of Paris and New York. Before discussing the boundary work of the first group, I first review specific results of my research on the upper middle class to illustrate some of the phenomena that can be tapped by using the approach discussed above.

The Boundary Work of the Upper Middle Class

The grammar through which French and American professionals and managers define the worth of others does not center on ascribed characteristics, such as age, gender, religion, and ethnicity.¹⁶ Instead,

¹⁵ For an illustration, see Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners*, chap. 5.

¹⁶ Mental maps were reconstructed from eighty in-depth interviews conducted with randomly sampled white college-educated professionals, managers, and entrepreneurs living in the suburbs of Paris and New York. The study also included eighty interviews conducted with professionals and entrepreneurs residing in Indianapolis and Clermont-Ferrand. These are not taken into consideration in this comparison of upper-middle- and lower-middle-class cul-

inductive analysis reveals that the men I talked to draw boundaries articulated around moral, cultural, and socioeconomic principles. Most interviewees draw these three types of boundaries, but French and American respondents define them differently. Whereas French men draw moral boundaries on the basis of high-status signals such as personal integrity, Americans stress more respect for the Ten Commandments and traditional morality. Furthermore, whereas the French stress power and social background as they draw socioeconomic boundaries, Americans are more concerned with income and professional success. The French also value cultural sophistication through refinement, familiarity with high culture, and intellectualism, whereas Americans stress self-actualization, expertise, and cosmopolitanism.

The three predominant criteria of evaluation are present both in French and American societies but are unevenly emphasized both within each society, and across groups within these societies. In other words, French and American boundary patterns are not irreducible to one another, but specific types of boundaries are more readily available in some contexts than others and are more predominant in some groups than in others. In general, although French and Americans value morality equally, Americans are more likely to use criteria of evaluation that pertain to the socioeconomic hierarchies of groups, that is, to the relative economic or professional success of individuals. In contrast to the French, they are less likely to use cultural boundaries that have to do with refinement and culture. Concretely, this means that Americans are more likely to designate as their heroes Lee Iacocca and Donald Trump than a great intellectual. Whereas social and cultural specialists (artists, teachers, ministers, social workers, and so on) draw weaker socioeconomic boundaries than do for-profit workers, American social and cultural specialists stress socioeconomic boundaries, that is, income as a standard of evaluation, much more than their French counterparts do, national boundary patterns reinforcing occupational boundary patterns.

A detailed analysis of the boundary work of French and American upper-middle-class men revealed other important differences between these two societies. For instance, whereas French professionals and managers are most likely to oppose evaluations that

tures to eliminate regional variations. Two dimensions of identity, namely level of education and occupation, are used as convenient standard entry points in several social milieus to obtain samples of discourse on worth. The use of these entry points does not imply in any way that they are determinant of boundary work or important criteria of evaluation for respondents.

rely primarily on socioeconomic position, Americans more readily oppose cultural and intellectual boundaries in the name of egalitarianism and subordinate cultural criteria of evaluation to moral ones, stressing honesty over refinement. Cultural boundaries are also more autonomous from socioeconomic boundaries in France, that is, French interviewees are less likely to assess the cultural status of people on the basis of their socioeconomic status than are Americans, whereas the latter group more often reads high socioeconomic status as a signal of high moral status.¹⁷ Finally, the cultural boundaries that Americans draw are more loosely bounded than those of the French, that is, more flexible, less hierarchalized, and less differentiated.

To determine the extent to which the boundary work of members of the upper middle class is characteristic of broader national patterns, one should compare it with national surveys and with the boundary work produced by other groups. I summarily address this question here by analyzing whether thirty French and American low-status white-collar workers I talked with draw boundaries differently than upper-middle-class respondents do.

The Boundary Work of Low-Status White-Collar Workers

As was the case for the upper middle class, moral, cultural, and socioeconomic boundaries hold an important place in the classification systems of French and American lower-middle-class men. However, racial boundaries, which were not salient in the boundary work of professionals and managers, were more salient among lower-status white-collar workers, religion, nationality, gender, and age were also slightly more salient than they were for the upper-middle-class population. I will concentrate here only on the most salient dimensions of boundary work, focusing on moral, cultural, socioeconomic, and racial boundaries. I argue that moral boundaries are more salient than other types of boundaries, that American low-status white-collar workers are much more similar to American upper-middle-class men than their French counterparts are to the French upper middle class, and that they also draw relatively strong socioeconomic boundaries by identifying themselves with the upper middle class and defining themselves against blue-collar workers and the lower class. They also more often adopt racist rhetoric, drawing moral and racial boundaries simultaneously when they castigate the "lazy wel-

¹⁷ Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners*, chaps. 4 and 5.

fare bums for sucking blood" out of them. The boundary work of French low-status white-collar workers, however, resembles more the upper middle class's than does the boundary work of their American counterparts in that the French group attributes more importance to being cultured than does the American group.

It should be noted that I am concerned with the stable working class, not the underclass or the unemployed.¹⁸ I talked to men only in order to minimize cultural variations unrelated to occupation, nationality, and race/ethnicity, my interviewees include, for instance, bank clerks, salesmen, photographers, postal clerks, and so on. I chose these men randomly from the phone books of working-class towns, such as Bobigny, Stains, Aubervilliers, Creteil, Ivry and Nanterre in the Paris suburbs, and Elizabeth, Roselle Park, Linden, and Rahway in the New York suburbs. I conducted the earlier interviews with upper-middle-class men in places such as Summit and New Providence, New Jersey, and Versailles and Saint-Cloud in the Paris suburbs. Each man was interviewed by me at a time and place he chose.¹⁹ The interviews lasted approximately two hours. Later, I will compare the trends that emerge from the interviews with national survey data and other secondary sources. For now, because of the small number of interviews, one should view the analysis as illustrative and as a preliminary attempt to identify wider trends in the French and American societies. It will also be complemented by the analysis of one hundred twenty interviews conducted with Euro-American and African-American blue-collar workers living in the New York suburbs and with North African immigrants and *francais de souche* blue-collar workers living in the Paris suburbs.

Moral Boundaries

Moral boundaries are the most salient type of boundaries drawn by both the French and American white-collar men I talked to. This

¹⁸ Interviewees have been working steadily for at least five years. They have a high-school degree or the equivalent of a CAP and they do not supervise more than ten workers.

¹⁹ The effect of my own identity on the interviews was in some ways minimized because I attempted to present myself with a blurred professional and national identity to limit the extent to which respondents adjusted their responses to my own identity. On this topic, see Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners*, chap. 1. As was the case in the upper-middle-class study, respondents were asked to concretely and abstractly describe people with whom they prefer not to associate, those in relation to whom they feel superior and inferior, and those who evoke hostility, indifference, and sympathy. They were also asked to describe negative and positive traits in their coworkers and acquaintances, as well as their child-rearing values. The criteria of evaluation behind their responses were systematically identified to recreate a template of their mental map of their grammar of evaluation.

trend was obvious in a wide range of topics discussed during the interviews. For instance, when probed about their role models and heroes, a surprisingly high number of respondents mentioned their fathers, justifying their choices by stressing the moral strength of these men. Similarly, when describing the qualities that they appreciate in their friends, low-status white-collar workers almost always put morality at center stage, as was the case when an American civil servant said that his best friend had “struggled through life like I did. His parents didn’t have. He is down to earth, he is a hard worker. He has old-fashioned, solid morals about himself and everything, which I like.” These moral boundaries were more salient for this group than they were for French and American upper-middle-class workers, maybe because morality, in principle universally available, allows lower-middle-class men to position themselves high in relation to other people.

As was the case for upper-middle-class men, American definitions of moral boundaries tended to stress traditional definitions of morality—the Ten Commandments and the defense of traditional work ethic—more than the French. Indeed, when asked to choose from a list of traits that they disliked most, 100 percent of the American white-collar workers I talked to chose “dishonest” and 53 percent chose “lazy,” in contrast to only 84 percent and 23 percent for their French counterparts. Similarly, when asked to choose five traits that they appreciated, 75 percent of Americans chose “honesty,” 75 percent chose “integrity,” 87 percent chose “responsible,” and 50 percent chose “hard working.” The percentages for the French respondents on these qualities were considerably lower: 50 percent, 42 percent, 57 percent, and 21 percent.

The premium American white-collar workers place on honesty, responsibility, and self-sufficiency shapes their political discourse significantly and particularly their attitudes toward altruism and the welfare state. After declaring proudly that he was a diehard Republican, one of the men I talked to explained that for him this means, “Don’t give anything for nothing. Incentive. Go get a job. [We should not] make it so easy to stay on unemployment, on welfare.” Another explained that he was a conservative Republican because he did not “like people who try to take advantage of things and take, take, and give nothing back.” These men were angry that they had to pay so much in taxes and had to support the poor who “don’t work at all and get everything for free.” Here, their rejection of the irresponsible and the lazy, that is, their drawing of moral boundaries, went hand in hand with their drawing of socioeconomic boundaries.

If the French low-status white-collar workers were less concerned with work ethics and responsibility than their American counterparts, they put much more stress on egalitarianism and solidarity and appeared to define morality in a collectivist instead of an individualist way. Indeed, 35 percent considered both “solidaire” and “égalitaire” to be highly valued traits, compared with only 18 percent and 6 percent of their American counterparts. The importance these French workers attached to solidarity was also revealed in their response to a number of questions. For instance, when probed on qualities they value in their friends, they stressed joviality because it indicated that one values human warmth above social climbing. Generosity, and particularly the gift of friendship, were also greatly valued, as were rituals of conviviality. Conversely, the co-workers most disliked were profiteers and egoists who did not follow basic rules pertaining to solidarity and sharing.

Discussions of French white-collar workers concerning welfare recipients and the unemployed were often tempered by this emphasis on solidarity, which they framed within a broad critique of the capitalist system and a defense of the politics of redistribution of work. For instance, a bank clerk said, “I think it is unacceptable that some people are unemployed while others can work as much as they want.” Many others opposed classical liberalism and its invisible hand because it was inhuman and penalized the weakest, implicitly drawing boundaries against upper classes. In line with a rhetoric promoted by the French Socialist and Communist parties for many decades, market principles were viewed as incompatible with the notion of sharing. This is an example of how available cultural repertoires shape specific dimensions of boundary work.

Cultural Boundaries

In my study of professionals and managers, I found that cultural boundaries based on refinement, familiarity with high culture, education, intelligence, and self-actualization were important to both French and American men, but were more important to the French, whereas Americans put a premium on self-actualization, the French valued refinement, familiarity with high culture, and cosmopolitanism. In this new study, I expected to find that lower-middle-class men would draw weak cultural boundaries on all dimensions. In fact, these boundaries are quite salient but are mostly drawn on the basis of intelligence, knowledge, and, to a lesser degree, education. The respect for intelligence seems to be greater in the United States, where

37 percent of low-status white-collar workers chose this trait as one of five important qualities in contrast to 21 percent of their French counterparts. Both groups are acutely aware that intelligence and knowledge are important bases for respect in their society. Their definitions of intelligence, however, are contrasted with upper-middle-class definitions in that they often explicitly dissociate intelligence from reading or school experience, as did Vincent, an electronics technician from Rahway, who said "Anybody can read a lot. Knowing a lot about politics has nothing to do with intelligence. That's just what you're interested in. Opinions, interests, keeping up with current events or not keeping up with current events has nothing to do with intelligence." Like Vincent, white-collar workers often define intelligence as being streetwise "in a person to person sense." For instance, one of them said that he thought he was of average intelligence because "I know when trouble is coming. You can recognize it on the street or something, you can recognize it at your job. I know when to keep my mouth shut and I know when to speak up. I know basically what's going on."

One can note two differences in the way French and American lower-middle-class men draw cultural boundaries: (1) lower-middle-class Americans more readily associate intelligence and education with ambition when discussing the worth of people, (2) French white-collar workers more often express their admiration for people who have more culture than they have themselves. Frank from Hempstead, Long Island, illustrated the first point when he said that if he had to draw a line to distinguish superior and inferior people, "then I would say intelligence probably ranks high among that distinction. The fact [is] that there are some people out there I think could do better and don't try. There's nothing wrong even if you don't want to become something, but don't blame somebody else for it." Similarly, an insurance salesman from Linden who does not have a college degree said that he felt superior to "people who are uneducated. People who have no control over their lives. People who are just a doormat or a dishrag. Somebody that just does what everybody tells them to do. They are just victims. I refuse to be a victim of any kind, for anybody. I'll never let it happen to me, and there's no reason why a person should be that way. If a person just does nothing to help themselves, I'm very hard on these people."

The greater value that French white-collar workers put on "having culture" was illustrated by a bank clerk who said that he "feels inferior to people who are very cultivated on everything, on many topics. It is particularly the ability to remember everything. For

instance, on the games on TV where people are asked general questions, you have people who can answer in one second to questions on all kinds of topics." If French low-status white-collar workers emphasize "being cultured" more than their American counterparts do, it might be because they acknowledge this aspect of upper-middle-class culture to a greater extent than do their American counterparts. Again, both the French Socialist and Communist parties have played an important role in strengthening cultural boundaries in France, encouraging their members to get involved culturally. This stress might partially explain national differences in cultural boundary patterns.

Socioeconomic Boundaries

When comparing American low-status white-collar workers with their French counterparts, one immediately recognizes that the first group draws stronger socioeconomic boundaries because they often evaluate people on the basis of social position and ambition. They readily draw boundaries against blue-collar workers and against the poor. They more often identify themselves with people who are above, explicitly attaching more importance to social success when determining the value of people. One could describe them as social Darwinists, almost *par excellence*. In contrast, the French low-status white-collar men I talked to are more critical of money and ambition as criteria of ranking. This difference also suggests that the American white-collar workers I talked to are closer to upper-middle-class culture than are their French counterparts.

The identification of low-status white-collar workers with the middle class and their rejection of blue-collar workers was illustrated in a telling way by Robert, a receiving clerk in his fifties, whose work required that he interact with warehouse workers. He said "I guess I feel I'm better [than the guys in the warehouse]. I mean they go into the break room, they play cards, I don't see any growth there. They're satisfied the way they are. In fact one of them is a college graduate, which blew me away, but he doesn't impress me at all either. I'm of a higher type. I'm a higher level person, that's all there is to it. I mean, I belong where I am [in the office]. I belong with Jim, and I belong with Vern. We've had more education. Even setting education aside I mean, [Jim and Vern] are in a different world. They're just a higher type."

Like Robert, a number of American white-collar workers explicitly wanted to identify themselves with individuals who were higher on the socioprofessional ladder instead of with blue-collar workers.

or people with less education, the two dimensions being inextricably linked. In contrast, rarely did French low-status white-collar workers express feelings of superiority toward blue-collar workers. They were more likely to insist, "We are all wage earners, we are all exploited." They were also reluctant to identify themselves with the upper middle class, or to draw boundaries against the poor. These individuals were simply more absent from their descriptions. Also, few defined themselves as ambitious, as having had very high aspirations, or as valuing "success" per se. Indeed, when asked to choose qualities that they found particularly important in others, only 14 percent of the French chose "ambitious" and 0 percent chose "successful," in contrast to 25 percent and 18 percent of the American counterparts. According to a phone technician, this rejection of ambition was justified because "the end of the world could happen anytime" and "life is long, humanity will exist for many billion of years after us, we have time. These people [the ambitious] are unable to see beyond their death, as if we were the end of it all."

Rejections of socioeconomic boundaries were also manifested in the attitudes of French low-status white-collar respondents toward money and power. Again, their negative attitudes toward money were not altogether different from those documented in the French upper middle class. They were, however, much more critical of power in general than were French professionals and managers, as if it were always experienced negatively, as something that is coercive and repressive instead of empowering. For them, power meant being constantly put into situations of dependency and vulnerability. There was much talk about the importance of resisting the authority of the bosses and of maximizing the autonomy of workers. This position was at times extended to a more encompassing critique of the class structure that draws on traditional leftist rhetoric.

Racial Boundaries

Although racial boundaries were almost totally absent from upper-middle-class interviews in France and the United States, they were quite important among low-status white-collar workers, particularly in the United States. Whereas French low-status white-collar workers often adopt an explicitly antiracist discourse in the name of republican principles, the majority of American interviewees explicitly drew strong boundaries against African Americans. For instance, a bank clerk was particularly blatant when he said "I don't particularly care for them. I work with them, I get along with them. Basically, if

they ain't white, I couldn't care less about them I have no use for them "

When asked to whom they felt superior and inferior, American white-collar workers constantly and subtly shifted from moral to racial boundaries, drawing both at once, and justifying racist attitudes via moral arguments They rejected African Americans by defining them as parasites who were unable to educate their children properly These themes resonated with the emphasis on responsibility, self-sufficiency, and work ethic discussed previously An electronics technician summarized the way that many perceive the situation when he said "I am prejudiced to a point What is a nice way to say it? I know this is a generality, and it does not go for all, it goes for a portion It's this whole unemployment and welfare gig What you see mostly on there is blacks I see it from working with some of them and the conversations I hear A lot of the blacks on welfare have no desire to get off it Why should they? It's free money I can't stand to see my hard-earned money going to pay for someone who wants to sit on his ass all day long and get free money That's bullshit and it may be white thinking, but hey, I feel it is true to a point "

A few white-collar men I talked to openly adopted antiracist positions One talked about the importance of "exposing our children to a diversity of people so that when they hear slurs, they can ward off these preconceptions [with] their experience with people of different backgrounds" (clerical worker) Such reactions were exceptional in the small group of American white-collar respondents They were much more salient in the French interviews Many oppose racism and other forms of segregation precisely in the name of solidarity and egalitarianism They view racism as an extension of the type of hierarchical thinking that leads some individuals to believe that wearing a tie makes someone a better human being ²⁰ Of course, many expressed concern about the decline of their neighborhoods, resulting from the growing immigrant population They are also worried about the consequences of these changes for their children and remembered nostalgically the more caring and integrated communities in which they grew up and in which traditional African clothing would never have been seen on the street ²¹

²⁰ I found several denunciations of racism, sexism, and ageism among my interviewees For instance, a draftsman said, "Wherever I go, the secretaries I see are always pretty and young I ask myself where are the old ones now? It is a form of racism There is not only the racism of color"

²¹ It is interesting to note that the few Parisian white-collar workers who were racists

Their reactions have to be understood in the context of the very familiar republican ideals that have shaped France's political culture since the Revolution of 1789. These ideals include the Jacobin notions of equality, universalism, and national unity that negate particularism based on locality, corporate membership, and birth, thereby weakening the probability of people drawing boundaries on the basis of ascribed characteristics. French racism is exercised most often not against blacks, but against North-African immigrants who, being Muslims, are viewed as unassimilable because they are unwilling and unable to participate in the universalistic system. European immigrants, by comparison, are relatively well integrated. Because of the still very influential republican ideals, French society remains relatively intolerant of multiculturalism and diversity in public life, and French nationality continues to draw a salient line between in-group and out-group and, indirectly, to downplay internal bases of segmentation that could act as alternative identity bases within the population.²²

Conclusion

This brief sketch of the boundary patterns that prevail among French and American low-status white-collar workers still calls for a number of qualifications. However, it does suggest the presence of somewhat contrasting models in which American workers are more culturally similar to their upper-middle-class counterparts than are French workers. Indeed, whereas the American group uses moral arguments to draw very strong socioeconomic and/or racial bound-

appeared to justify their attitudes in universalistic terms to have a sociological understanding of the reasons for differences in behavior, or to distance themselves from their racism. For instance, an airplane technician confessed: "Whether we want it or not, we always have behaviors that are more or less racist. When I go to a shopping center where you have young North Africans who are hanging out, sometimes I have negative feelings toward them. It is always at the level of the stereotype, the typical reaction toward foreigners or some foreigners. You will tell me racism is not nice, people repeat this to us all the time, and it is true that it is not nice to have these stupid reactions, but sometimes it is stronger than us because they are very deep inside of us. I ask myself what are they doing here? My reaction is almost at the aesthetic level. Some have 'sales gueules,' but there are Arabs with whom I work with whom I get along very well."

²² By documenting the salience of dimensions of identities in both countries, it is also possible to identify the most important bases of social segmentation and exclusion. Elsewhere I argue that while race and poverty are the most salient bases of social segmentation in the United States and culture and language are the most salient in Quebec, nationality plays a more important role in France. See Michele Lamont, "The Frontiers of Our Dreams Are No Longer the Same: Cultural Dynamics of Exclusion and Community in France, Quebec, and the United States." Paper prepared for the Liechtenstein Conference on Self-Determination, Princeton University, June 1995.

aries against African Americans, blue-collar workers, and the poor, French workers tend to downplay social position and success as criteria for assessing the value of people and emphasize solidarity and egalitarianism more. Furthermore, although the French workers I talked to are more similar to French professionals and managers in their respect for culture, like their American counterparts, they also draw cultural boundaries on the basis of education and intelligence which they define as “being street smart.” The question remains whether these trends characterize the French and American low-status white-collar populations at large.

The picture that emerges is not unlike the one that was traced a number of years ago by other comparativists interested in French and American workers, such as Gallie, Lash, and Hamilton, who also stressed the weak middle-class identification of French workers.²³ These researchers, however, much like today’s students of national identity such as Smith, most often presumed the salience of a specific dimension of identity—class and, indirectly, class consciousness—instead of analyzing the latter as one of several dimensions of identity. Even the very ascribed characteristics on which much of the recent literature on identity has focused—gender, race, nation, sexual orientation—are not necessarily the identity dimensions most salient in the life of low-status white-collar workers. I hope I have demonstrated that it is important to approach this issue empirically. Furthermore, the lives of the men I talked to appear to be very rooted, both locally and socially, and their boundary work appeared to be far less negotiable and free-floating than the picture of identity that is provided in postmodernist writings, perhaps because these writings best describe the lives of countercultural intellectuals who give intersubjective validity to postmodernism.²⁴

What does this explain about national identity? How does this analysis inform one’s understanding of what it means to be French today? What it means to be French today is inextricably linked with some notion of what it means to be worthy and unworthy and with how these definitions of worth are articulated around notions of morality, culture, socioeconomic status, race, and nation. As ob-

²³ Duncan Gallie, *Social Inequality and Class Radicalism in France and Britain* (Cambridge, 1983), Richard Hamilton, *Affluence and the French Worker* (Princeton, 1967), and *Class and Politics in the United States* (New York, 1972), Scott Lash, *The Militant Worker: Class and Radicalism in France and America* (Teaneck, N.J., 1984).

²⁴ For an analysis of postmodern theory as reflecting the specific cultural outlook of post-sixties intellectuals, see Zygmunt Bauman “Is there a Postmodern Sociology?”, in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, ed. Steven Seidman (New York, 1994).

served, for the French lower-middle-class men I talked to, worth seems to be dissociated from ascribed characteristics such as race to a greater extent than for their American counterparts. The importance they attach to group solidarity as a dimension of morality, in contrast to, for instance, a work ethic, reflects a long tradition of labor resistance as an important element of the historical cultural repertoire of French society. The relationship between these repertoires and boundary work still needs to be examined more closely by drawing on the work of Schudson and others who are concerned with the very conditions that make aspects of cultural repertoires resonate with people's experience.²⁵

More research is also needed to obtain a clearer understanding of the other limits of this study. Indeed, we still ignore exactly how much the boundaries that people draw in interview situations correspond to the subjective boundaries they draw in real-life discussions and how context-bound the boundary patterns documented here are. More research is needed to assess whether boundary work reveals deeply seated categories or only those that are enough on the surface to manifest themselves in interview situations. Do these boundaries point only to superficial rules of interaction that are openly fought over, or do they also pertain to deep cultural rules, that is, to taken-for-granted and cross-situational rules? How can one interpret the fact that domains of identity such as sexuality were not more salient in the answers of respondents than were their identities as earthlings, mammals, or carnivores? Can domains of identity not be salient for different reasons? For now, given the general lack of empirical knowledge concerning boundary work, it seems justified to assume for heuristic purposes that the boundaries that emerged during the interviews were illustrative of the categories most immediately salient and most central in the interviewees' mental maps. It is unlikely that these boundaries are divorced from the respondents' fundamental mental maps even if they are enacted in context.

25 Michael Schudson, "How Culture Works: Perspectives on Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols," *Theory and Society* 18 (1989): 153–80. On repertoires as cultural tool-kits, see Ann Swidler, "Culture as Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 273–86.

