

Michèle Lamont

Money,
Morals,
& **M**anners

The Culture of the
French and the American
Upper-Middle Class

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Money, Morals, and Manners

THE CULTURE OF THE FRENCH AND AMERICAN UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS

Michèle Lamont

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Ce livre est dédié à mon père et ma mère,
Jacques et Ninon.

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NOTE TO THE READER

This book compares how members of the French and the American upper-middle class define what means to be a “worthy person,” and it explains the most important cross-national differences in the definitions by looking at broad cultural and structural features of French and American society. The analysis draws primarily on interviews conducted with 160 college-educated, white male professionals, managers, and businessmen who live in and around Indianapolis, New York, Paris, and Clermont-Ferrand. I compare competing definitions of what it means to be a “worthy person” by analyzing symbolic boundaries, i.e., by looking at implicit definitions of purity present in the labels interviewees use to describe, abstractly and concretely, people with whom they don’t want to associate, people to whom they consider themselves to be superior and inferior, and people who arouse hostility, indifference, and sympathy. Hence, the study analyzes the relative importance attached to religion, honesty, low moral standards, cosmopolitanism, high culture, money, power, and the likes, by Hoosiers, New Yorkers, Parisians, and Clermontois.

The book opens with descriptions of some of the upper-middle-class men with whom I talked. The Prologue gives a sense of the texture of the phenomena that I am describing, of what it means to be exclusive; only after going through the subsequent chapters will the reader fully understand how the descriptions take on a new meaning when looked at through sociological lenses.

[Chapter 1](#) introduces the theoretical issues that this study addresses. [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#) explore differences between the cultures of French and American professionals, managers, and businessmen. [Chapters 5 and 6](#) explain these variations, while [Chapter 6](#) also compares differences between various types of people. For instance, it contrasts the cultures of academics and businessmen, those upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals as well as those of individuals who are first-generation upper-middle-class members and those whose families have belonged to the upper-middle-class for several generations. The last chapter brings together and explores further the theoretical contributions of the book. If the study properly addresses sociological issues and is primarily written for social scientists, it will also be of interest to nonacademics who wish to gain a better understanding of the culture of a greatly understudied group, i.e., of the men who, occupying the top of the social ladder, exercise considerable power in shaping the lives of their fellow countrymen and countrywomen as well as the characters of their respective societies.

SKETCHING THE LANDSCAPE: SOME ILLUSTRATIVE VIGNETTES

Je juge donc que le sens de la vie est la plus pressante des questions.

—Albert Camus

Therefore I believe that the meaning of life is the most pressing of all questions.

CULTURAL SOPHISTICATION AS A SINE QUA NON

Sitting in his Paris studio, surrounded by walls covered with his art, dressed so as to totally express his individuality, the avant-garde professor of architecture talks about himself with great ease. He offers a very elaborate description of his identity, his friends, and his work. His romantic reconstruction of the family history is Proustian in style and replete with historical references; the family's colonial past is turned into an exotic and captivating story; the little rituals of bourgeois life are told in nostalgic detail. Didier Aucour creates his persona as he speaks.¹ His identity is embedded in images borrowed from the worlds of Andy Warhol, Rabelais, and Truffaut. He has a theory about himself, about his art, about the total role of art in his life. The phone rings constantly; students drop by to leave sketches; old friends who came to have lunch with him wait downstairs for a long hour while we conclude the interview.

In this environment, everything is carefully chosen to express something, an *état d'âme*. Didier explains that creativity gives him power: "I believe that there is a human nature which is not only concerned with material power but also with irrationality, something akin to the concept of superman, the Nietzschean superman, where surpassing oneself, whether it is religiously or creatively, is central. I believe in the desperate quest of the artist which is located at another level of reflection than pure matter."² Those living in a world of purely material values are scorned; this applies particularly to the *Français moyen*, the kind who drives to the ocean for his summer vacation. Accordingly, Didier depicts his friends as, above all, artistic, imaginative, intellectually stimulating, and active. Refinement is crucial:

I like refinement in the sense of subtlety in the way of thinking, subtlety in the way of being. I truly like people who are refined in their taste, the way they move, the way they present themselves, the way they think. And imagination [is] the most sublime dimension of the act of being.

Didier also likes people who are distant ("It is part of refinement, of the aristocratic dream, you see: *aristos-cratos*: *cratos* means the best. I like it: being distant means respecting others"). He is indifferent to people who are nice, considerate, religious, and well-informed, while he despises those he perceives as stupid and vulgar, or as leading boring lives and lacking in imagination.³ Finally, Didier describes himself as pretentious and egotistical and declares that the essential in life is not money but pride (*l'orgueil*).

John Bloom is an economist. He lives in Summit, New Jersey, a posh New York suburb. In contrast to Didier, John does not perceive himself as aesthetically sophisticated. The tasteful English-country decor of his sumptuous home is "98.99% due to my wife": she inherited the antique furniture that decorates the room, and the drapes are made from a rich fabric she found in a shop on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. His wife, who has a perfect figure, has brought us Pepperidge Farm cookies' and

amaretto-flavored coffee.

After he got “burned out” by corporate politics at AT&T, John started to work for a consulting firm in Manhattan, to which he commutes everyday. He lives in a highly competitive professional world where peer respect is the name of the game: “What I find most enjoyable is when I get unsolicited calls, when business associates recommend me without any urging. My ego needs that. It is very much a desire, a need to feel that the thing that I do, that I believe that I do very well, other people also perceive I do very well. It’s the endless quest for external validation.” Peer respect for his competence gives meaning to his life, which is almost entirely structured around his work. The latter allows him to keep up his “high lifestyle.”

John clearly defines himself by his intellectual curiosity: “I am somebody who would pass himself off as the intellectual type, absolutely.” He says he really enjoys “intellectualizing.” His friendships are built around exchanging ideas on a wide range of topics: “My whole point of view is to attempt to answer certain basic questions about life. What is the purpose of it? The purpose is the development of your mind, of your thinking process, of your ability to reflect on things. So that, for me, feels like to have a meaningful existence, an untrivial existence.” He is trying to raise himself above the vagaries of the corporate world, and his intellectual power is a means to this end. It keeps him mentally alive and provides him freedom from the drudgery of everyday life.

John easily confesses to being intellectually exclusive and feeling superior to “people who I see are not as intellectually developed as I am, who don’t have my natural curiosity or my wide range of interests. In a social situation, if I’m dealing with somebody who I think is very intellectually inferior to me, and he begs to differ with me, I probably won’t be very tolerant or very decent about it at all. Being “nice” and “considerate” are peripheral to John’s repertory of modes of interaction.

Peer respect and intelligence are not the only yardsticks of success used by John: “I would feel inferior in a social situation, if I meet somebody who initially appears to have it all: good-looking, well-dressed, articulate, knowledgeable, has traveled the world, and is successful. I feel very inferior to those kinds of people.” The images of success John values are those offered to the American upper middle class by popular magazines such as *Esquire*, *M.*, and *G.Q.* These images, whose enactment requires considerable material resources, assume a tangible character in John’s gallery of desirable ideal types.

In contrast to Didier, John values worldly success as much as he values intelligence. His cultural standards of worth are compounded by social standards, for he feels inferior to people who are socially more successful than he. The boundaries that structure his perception of the upper-middle class world are organized around both cultural and socioeconomic criteria.⁴

Fortyish, Lou Taylor is a tall, mild-mannered, tweedy-looking academic administrator who lives in Indianapolis. He comes from a well-established Midwestern family which includes three generations of Presbyterian ministers and theologians. When he was young, he used to listen on Sundays to his uncles debate fine scholastic points around the dinner table: “They used to have these great debates about God, and I thought it was wonderful. I was just fascinated by these discussions ... There just didn’t seem like anything else for me to do but go to seminary.” He got his Ph.D. because “an advanced degree was important to me ... it helped me be comfortable with other smart people.” After working for a few years in an inner-city ministry on the West Coast, he took a position in an Indianapolis college.

Lou lives in a Presbyterian world of muted conflicts, mildly expressed feelings, and carefully chosen words. He declares that he gets along with everyone: “My wife says if people can’t get along with me, they’re in bad shape.” His work requires that he interact with groups, and he feels that he

very good at it. He is a team player and others trust him.

Like John, Lou is more interested in individuals who see the world differently from most people who “try to find other ways to understand things that are going on.” He defines his friends as refined because “they are well-read, sensitive to suffering, careful about the ways they express their ideas—they would be honest but have some concern about how they are heard.” They have culture, and they are open to the world. Because his old friends live far away, Lou feels very isolated, but “it would require too much energy to invest in new friends.” In the meantime, his life is increasingly centered around his family. Despite the fact that he is not satisfied with this, he can’t conceive of alternatives and he feels trapped.

Feeling superior to people who have boring jobs, and particularly to manual workers, Lou says “I’m sure glad I am not doing that ... But they probably make more money than I do. So I don’t know what superior and inferior means in this case.” However, he feels inferior to people who “have more.” A recent encounter with the president of an insurance company made him feel “not real comfortable in that great big office downtown. Because the guy has so much, I kept thinking: ‘How come this person has all this and I don’t?’ ‘What does that say about me?’”

Unlike Didier and like John, Lou does not question the relevance of worldly success as a criterion for assessing superiority. But like Didier and John, he attributes transcendental meaning to other realities: “In life there is something that one is, that has a ‘being’ dimension, beyond the external pile of money I get, that is internally satisfying ... It gives satisfaction that I am participating in something that is beyond me, of ultimate worth.” Lou’s neighbor lacks this dimension of meaning. “The guy who lives next door to us has been working in the food industry all his life. Nice guy, good neighbor, but unsophisticated in that his primary concern is where his next sale is coming from, you know, just beating out a living ... He’s looking forward to retiring to have more of his own time.”

These three individuals inhabit highly contrasted spaces: an artist’s studio in a decrepit building at the periphery of Paris; a depersonalized office niche in a Manhattan skyscraper; and an old Indianapolis college, redolent of beeswax. They are all white, middle-aged, college-educated professionals. They belong to the upper-middle class, along with 10–15 percent of the French and the American populations. Members of this class have what most people desire and are what most people aspire to be.⁵ Their lives are offered as a model to the rest of the population by the mass media and the advertising industry. They exercise influence on events, products, and people: they conceive, advise, hire, promote, judge, select, and allocate.

Didier, John, and Lou are similar in that they all practice *cultural exclusivism*: cultural standards such as intelligence, refinement, curiosity, and aesthetic sophistication are the decisive yardsticks they use in their everyday assessment of self and others. These three men are not very much concerned with moral standards: their definition of a “worthy person” assigns a minor role to honesty and altruism with a few exceptions. The cultural exclusivism of the academic administrator and the economist is, to be sure, complemented by their socioeconomic exclusivism, as suggested by the importance they attach to worldly success. They both are also somewhat less culturally Darwinian: they get along with most people, are more culturally tolerant, and less prone to order people along a sort of cultural “chain of being.” In contrast, the architecture professor shows a great deal of intolerance for differences. For him, cultural sophistication is a *sine qua non* for interpersonal relations.

MORAL TALES

Paul Anderson lives in Indianapolis in a ranch house. He is a senior executive at Fort Harrison, a finance center of the Department of Defense. He is married and has two sons; his wife has been working as a part-time receptionist since the kids started school. He runs marathons and is highly competitive. Coming from a “hardworking background,” he made his way up the professional ladder and he is now widely respected by his coworkers. “I am a great believer in human beings. I have always established a lot of pleasing relationships with the secretaries and administrative people, the chiefs that work for me and all ... Now I do have an awful lot of people that I think would stand behind me or select me as an individual that they really thought a lot of.”

Paul defines himself in opposition to his professional colleagues who are “real aggressive, eager climbers ... they probably have many people against them, and not that many for. [They are in it] only for themselves, and don’t sort of look out for their subordinates, and care for people first.” Paul says he is not very ambitious: “I have a theory that no matter what your level of success is, what that ultimately translates into is happiness. So if you’re smart enough to be happy at whatever level you are, you’ve achieved what you can achieve and you get more anyway.”

The Andersons are very active in their church: “We get sort of a sense of well-being, and contentment with the people, the friends, and those groups of people who are concerned about the family, and are concerned about helping each other. It’s a very warm church community.” Refined, artistic, and cosmopolitan people leave him indifferent. Being religious, hardworking, and considerate is much more important. Accordingly, Paul strongly dislikes people who have low moral standards. His feelings of inferiority are largely articulated around religion, and in particular around knowledge of religious matters: “If I had to say the groups of people that I really feel a little inferior to, one of them are the people in our church that are very well-read and devout in their religion. Again, not fanatical people, but they have the ability to, if a question is asked in Sunday school class, they are very knowledgeable ... I sort of say to myself, I’m not going to say anything now, all I’m going to show is how little I know.”

Michel Dupuis lives in Versailles, in the western suburbs of Paris. His large apartment overlooks one of the chic “boulevards” in front of the château. He inherited from his grandmother a furniture plant that at one point hired up to a thousand workers. Brought up in a strong humanist tradition and educated by Jesuits, Michel defines his mission in life as helping his employees to develop themselves fully as human beings. He assesses his success not only in economic terms but also in humanist and relational terms. He explains: “Some people started with us at the bottom of the ladder when they were nineteen. They have grown with the firm and now have important positions. For me, that precisely is the most important thing, that the firm was able to help some people to develop themselves as human beings ... the goal was not to make money but to do something ... Do you know Rogers, Carl Rogers? Well, my goal was to become ‘someone’ and to help others to become ‘someone’ ... This means feeling that you are in a process of developing yourself, that you feel good about yourself and others. ‘I am OK, you are OK.’”

Like many bourgeois Catholic couples, Michel and Mariette have a number of children—eight, all married and leading active professional lives. They are very involved in the Catholic organizations in Versailles. Mariette teaches catechism classes. They both have been participating over the last ten years in the Ligue Notre-Dame, a group that brings together couples to share their religious faith and family life. Michel’s personal heroes include Antoine de St-Exupéry and l’abbé Pierre, a French exemplar of charity not unlike Mother Theresa. For years Michel was involved in an elite business association aimed at humanizing capitalism.

The Dupuis like to spend time and share good wine with their friends. They often have people over

for a meal; their dining table easily sits fifteen. Michel likes people who are “true to themselves; they don’t try to pretend that they are something else than what they are, to be interested in things that don’t interest them. We prefer spontaneous people, who are what they are. And also people who like to share a good dinner, who appreciate the pleasure of being together.” Like Paul Anderson, Michel is irritated by people who are always looking for an edge, who think only about money, who would do anything to advance. “Anyway, these people in general are not very interested in us.”

Willy Pacino is first-generation upper-middle class. His parents came over from Italy to work in the Pennsylvania coal mines. Willy went to college on a football scholarship and completed law school at a Midwestern university. He is now a labor arbitrator in New Jersey. Of the Midwest he says: “The greatest asset out there is the people, the sincerity, down-to-earth, good work outfits, and when they talk, they say what they mean, and I like that.” In the East, on the other hand, “you’re going to run into your pseudosophisticate ... the one that appears to be what he is not and wishes to be what he is not. He’s not well-read, he is not well-cultured, and he doesn’t have worldly experience, and yet he holds out this air that he has all of the above and you see right through him.”

Willy describes his friends as “real people; some are working people, some are attorneys, some are officials of unions. But they all have to be real, real in the sense of sincerity, and share the values that I respect: family, respecting others, and, I guess, sincerity, compassion.” Willy’s friends are honest. “There is nobody bullshitting anybody else. I hate to sit around to listen to idle bullshit, irrelevant chatter ... talk about what they’ve achieved over and over, and where they were, like [imitating female voice]: ‘I went to Switzerland and I got invited to this wedding and you should have seen the affair, and we’re inviting them back and did I tell you that we saw that play? And do you know what that cost?’ I can’t stand that when people say ‘Do you know what it costs?’; they got to tell you what it costs. If I like it, I like it. I know what’s expensive, and what’s inexpensive. Don’t keep reminding me of what you’re doing and how much it cost! I am never with my friends to start bragging. They like me for what I am, I am Willy Pacino.” And Willy Pacino is “the sort of guy I click with you or I don’t click with you, I respect you or I don’t respect you. I’m not iffy-wiffy.”

Willy is not very religious. He is a family man. He is proud of his boys and helped his nephews pay their way through college: now there are several Pacinos who are professionals.

These three also share common traits. In contrast to the previous group, they do not consider cultural sophistication important. More central to them are moral qualities: honesty, respect for others, charity, egalitarianism, and sincerity. Worldly success is secondary to “what kind of human being you are.” They oppose those who judge others on the basis of their income, occupational prestige, or the status of their leisure-time activities. In brief, they all dislike social climbers. Their definitions of “worthy person” revolves around moral rather than cultural principles.

THIS-WORLDLY WORLDS

Craig Neil is much more interested in worldly goods. He owns a carleasing business on Long Island. Behind his house, adjacent to his backyard, runs a canal where he keeps his yacht during the summer. The kitchen has just been entirely redone at great cost. Craig and I are sitting on expensive-looking contemporary leather sofas. The poodle keeps running over the cream carpet with his muddy paws.

Craig is depressed: it takes too much money to live in this area. “It puts a lot of stress on a person ’cause you’ve got to maintain that livelihood and that lifestyle.” Yet he considers himself very successful because “financially, I’ve done well, materialistically, I’ve done well, and I’ve reached

level in my life that I'm happy, comfortable with, the comfort level I call that." If there is one person he respects, it is Lee Iacocca: "A successful man that came from nothing and worked himself up from studying engineering, joining Ford Motor Company, and look where he is today. That's a fellow right there. I mean there are many of them, but to give you a highlight, that's a successful person. I admire him. Absolutely, no question about it."

For Craig, success is the key to everything: "The person I like is a person that's an aggressive person, a doer, who will wake up early with a positive attitude, and move on and do successful things. Accordingly, he confesses that "highly motivated, highly successful, highly aggressive people, I would feel inferior to." He feels superior to people "who put in a forty-hour week and say, 'Well, I've put my forty hours in and I want to be paid my fifty or hundred thousand dollars a year because I've put my forty hours in.'"

Craig does not like to be associated with losers, "with someone who has low esteem for himself, who is not aggressive, doesn't want to accomplish much for his family, or do better for himself." He does not care for ideologues; he prefers someone who is level-headed, "who looks at both sides of the story, leveling the pros and the cons and using his experience as a decision maker. And who says 'Gee, even though I'm for it, maybe I should say no because look at this.' And back and forth, it's a give-and-take ratio."

Craig says he is very materialistic: "I'm a materialistic person because that is the only sign that shows you how you're accomplishing. Like 'Gee, you went and moved from a two-bedroom house to a three-bedroom house, from a three-bedroom house to a four-bedroom house, from a quarter acre to a half acre.' You know what I mean? So the only leverage you have on anything is the scale of how much better are you doing: Have you bought a used car this year rather than a new car? Is your kid going to a crappy high school or a better high school? Is she going to a better college or a worse? So materialistic things, yes, are very important to me, to see how I am doing. I have nothing else to."

In Clermont-Ferrand, an important city located in the middle of France, Charles Dutour, the chief executive of a large hospital, also delights in this-worldly success. I was able to talk to this energetic man after waiting for two hours while observing his secretaries authoritatively screen phone calls and visitors.

Mr. Dutour's yardstick of success is not money but power: "I cannot think that it is possible to say that we don't like power. If it was the case, we would not be there. I believe that there are two groups of people in life: those who are made to command, and those who are made to obey. We are among those who like power, because power also gives independence." In this context it is not surprising to discover that Mr. Dutour easily admits to having a "sense of the hierarchy," to respecting those who are above him, and to expecting respect from those below him. He says he cannot stand irony.

This hospital director is a proud member of the local elite. He participates in the fourteenth of July parade with the mayor and other dignitaries. People ask him for favors all the time. Like other local "notables," he makes a habit of "sending back the elevator," i.e., of returning favors. He feels more comfortable talking with the chief of police than with a simple cop: "When you arrive at a certain level of responsibility, you think differently, and if you don't, you encounter problems. You can talk about hunting and fishing with a cop, but I don't fish or hunt."

Son of *petits boutiquiers* (small-business owners), Mr. Dutour has moved up considerably on the social ladder. He has sacrificed to his work both his family (he is separated from his wife) and his social life (he has no friends, only professional acquaintances). The people he likes are hardworking, competitive, pragmatic, and competent. People who are refined, conformist, religious, and nice leave him indifferent. As he says, "You see, I reduce everything to my profession."

Mat Howard reminds me of Craig Neil, who owns the car-leasing business. Mat is a real estate developer in Indianapolis. He has made a lot of money and has also lost a lot. He is a gambler, nouveau riche, and an ex-playboy. A few years ago, he got married and things changed. He became a homebody but remained a wheeler-dealer. His closest friend is “fifty-two years old going on twenty-eight. You know what I mean: very well-to-do, very athletic, does all the triathlons, and everything else. Still living the lifestyle, just travels a lot; very much a ladies’ man. Typically dates women in their twenties and thirties. He does not look fifty-two.” Like Craig, Mat lives in a world that values success. And like Craig, when asked what his success gives him, Mat answers. “Lots of money, that’s the reward of having made it. Let’s face it, most men want to build their ego by saying, ‘I made it. I’ve been successful.’ Hell, how do you grade that success? You grade it by the amount of money you’ve made.” Strangely enough, Mat feels inferior to people who have made it with the help of their parents. “I’ve had to work hard for everything. This guy comes along, and he’s making tons of money, and it was handed to him on a silver platter. I should not feel inferior to those people, but the tendency is to do that.”

To various extents, these three characters live in this-worldly worlds. Their standards of social hierarchization are less organized around culture and moral character than around various measures of worldly success and social position, although their sense of boundary might at times combine multiple themes. The real estate developer and the owner of the car-leasing business use money as a yardstick of success. The hospital administrator values power and influence. The way he relates to others is explicitly affected by their class position, whether they be bakers, cops, or chiefs of police.

The first group of men I described, more inclined to value cultural and intellectual qualities, attach relatively less importance to worldly success, while the second group—the bearers of morality—vehemently reject the relevance of class position or social status for interpersonal assessment. The three groups of men live side by side. Yet, in another sense, they live worlds apart and to a large extent define themselves in opposition to one another. The way they assess themselves and others—the boundaries they draw between desirable and undesirable traits, inferior and superior human beings—dramatizes the classification systems that predominate in the French and American upper-middle class. It is these very systems that I wish to explore.

THE QUESTIONS AND THE STAGE

Sans considération, sans pitié, sans pudeur autour de moi, grands et laids, on a bâti des mu
—C. P. Cava

Without consideration, without compassion, shamelessly, around me, tall and ugly, they have built wa

ISSUES AND APPROACHES

How do people get access to valued professional resources such as well-paying jobs, interesting assignments, and promotions? Degrees, seniority, and experience are essential, but also important are being supported by a mentor, being included in networks of camaraderie, and receiving informal training. Getting access to these informal resources largely depends on sharing a valued cultural style. Indeed, research shows that managers favor employees who resemble them culturally, and that corporate success partly depends on making other managers “comfortable” by conforming in cultural matters and not “standing out.”¹

The present study explores the cultural categories through which the upper-middle class defines valued cultural styles. This task is a particularly important one because upper-middle-class members tend to control the allocation of many of the resources most valued in advanced industrial societies. Moreover, the mass media and the advertising industry constantly offer upper-middle-class culture as a model to members of other classes,² who often come to emulate it or to define their identities against it.³ Despite the influence of upper-middle-class culture in the United States and elsewhere, and despite the fact that much has been written on resistance to dominant culture, the latter has rarely been submitted to close scrutiny.⁴

What is primarily at issue here is the nature of the criteria that people use to define and discriminate between worthy and less worthy persons, i.e., between “their sort of folks” and “the sort they don’t much like.” To identify these criteria I scrutinize symbolic boundaries—the types of lines that individuals draw when they categorize people—and high-status signals—the keys to other evaluative distinctions. More specifically, different ways of believing that “we” are better than “they” are compared by analyzing both the standards that underlie status assessments and the characteristics of symbolic boundaries themselves—their degree of rigidity, for instance. This contributes to developing a more adequate and complex view of status, i.e., of the salience of various status dimensions across contexts. It also helps us to understand how societies and social classes differ culturally. By contrasting the cultures of members of the French and American upper-middle classes we will see that the disapproval that New Yorkers often express toward Midwestern parochialism, the frequent criticisms that the French address to American puritan moralism, the scorn that businessmen give toward intellectualism, and the charges that social and cultural specialists frequently make against materialism and business interests can be interpreted as specific instances of a pervasive phenomenon (i.e., as boundary work) rather than as incommensurable manifestations of national character, political attitudes, regionalism, etc.⁵ Using the framework presented here, it will be possible to view prejudices and stereotypes as the supra-individual by-products of basic social processes that are shaped by the cultural resources that people have at their disposal and by the structural situations they live in.

The book studies upper-middle-class culture using the comparative method, on the assumption

that cultural differences—the shock of otherness—will make valued cultural traits salient.⁶ This analysis is based on 160 semidirected interviews conducted with a random stratified sample of male college-graduate professionals, managers, and businessmen living in and around Indianapolis, New York, Paris, and Clermont-Ferrand, the regional metropolis of an agricultural *département* in the Massif Central that is not unlike Indianapolis (for a comparison see [Appendix II](#)). I focus on France and the United States because, being a Quebecer, I am an outsider to both cultures, and yet I know both of them from the inside, having lived in France and the United States for four and five years respectively, at the time I conducted the interviews. Furthermore, as I will argue below, French and American cultures show somewhat different formal characteristics that illuminate important theoretical issues.

I have chosen to interview *white male* members of the upper-middle class because the individuals still hold most of the powerful positions in the workplace and are likely to have influence as gatekeepers.⁷ With the goal of exploring gender differences in boundary work, however, I also conducted fifteen interviews with female professionals, managers, and businesswomen residing in the New York suburbs. Gender differences will be briefly discussed toward the end of the book, even though more interviews are needed before firm conclusions can be reached. Future research should also consider differences in the boundary work of whites and the growing number of minority upper-middle-class members.⁸

Experts have suggested that the display of “cultivated dispositions,” i.e., of cultural capital, is one of the most highly prized cultural traits among the upper-middle class. Most important, in his pioneering work on French culture, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued that members of the “dominant class” share distinctive tastes and lifestyles that act as status markers and facilitate integration into this group. These tastes are defined largely by cultivated dispositions and the ability to display an adequate command of high culture. According to Bourdieu, outsiders who have not been socialized into these aesthetic dispositions at an early stage in life cannot easily become integrated into high status groups as they are often excluded due to their cultural style.⁹

In the United States, sociologists interested in the cultural reproduction of elites have also emphasized how educational and occupational attainment is related to the display of cultivated dispositions and to familiarity with high culture (i.e., cultural capital).¹⁰ This focus on refinement and high culture can be explained in part by the availability of survey data on the topic. While this research has contributed considerably to our knowledge of the effect of culture on inequality, however, it has defined a priori what status signals are most valued by adopting the analytic categories built into the survey questionnaires.¹¹ In contrast, by using open-ended questions, it is possible to allow people themselves to define what high status signals are most important to them. As the vignettes presented earlier suggest, these signals vary greatly across individuals as they range, for instance, from honesty and sincerity to competitiveness and material success.

So far no one has attempted to estimate the relative salience of various types of high status signals in the upper-middle-class culture despite recent calls for more research on this topic.¹² The present study fills this gap by analyzing the criteria of purity that interviewees use to describe, abstractly and concretely, people they perceive as “better” or “worse” than themselves, or to characterize individuals they don’t want to associate with—as Kai Erikson has argued, boundaries exist only if they are repeatedly defended by members of inner groups.¹³ I thereby chart the cultural categories through which upper-middle-class members perceive and value others, stressing what differences are at the *center* of their maps of perception and what differences are *ignored*. Hence, my project is to illuminate the structures of thought through which upper-middle-class people organize (i.e., select and hierarchize) the “raw data” they receive on others.

At the outset of this project I intended to study differences in the ways in which French and American upper-middle-class members draw cultural boundaries.¹⁴ However, I rapidly discovered while conducting interviews that the signals used by individuals to assess high status often pertained to moral and socioeconomic standing as well as to cultural attainment. Furthermore, it appeared that the large majority of these signals pertained to at least one of these standards; some signals, such as self-actualization, were taken to be simultaneously a proof of high moral character, strong success orientation, and cultural sophistication. Consequently, my study focuses on these three standards or types of symbolic boundaries:

Moral boundaries are drawn on the basis of moral character; they are centered around such qualities as honesty, work ethic, personal integrity, and consideration for others. Paul Anderson drew moral boundaries when he explained that he feels superior to people who have low moral standards and when he criticized some of his coworkers for not caring about people first. So did Michel Dupuy when he described his distaste for social climbers and for those who lack personal integrity.

Socioeconomic boundaries are drawn on the basis of judgments concerning people's social position as indicated by their wealth, power, or professional success. Craig Neil drew such boundaries when he explained that money is the yardstick he uses to evaluate his success against that of others and that he feels superior to people who are not high achievers. Similarly, Charles Dutour drew socioeconomic boundaries when he stressed that his friends are all very influential members of the local elite.

Cultural boundaries are drawn on the basis of education, intelligence, manners, tastes, and command of high culture. Someone who describes all of his friends as refined is drawing cultural boundaries. Didier Aucour and John Bloom both drew such boundaries when they talked about the feeling of superiority toward people who are less intelligent and less culturally sophisticated than themselves.

The most important contribution of this study is to enrich our grasp of mental maps and boundary work. It is also to provide a more complex understanding of cultural differences between nations and classes by analyzing these via symbolic boundaries, i.e., via the criteria that are used to evaluate status. The major empirical findings of this study, however, pertain to the relative salience of the three types of boundaries in both countries as revealed by the interviews, a survey of available research, and a quantitative comparison of the boundary work produced by all the respondents. First, I show that whereas in both France and the United States sociological studies of high status signals have focused almost exclusively on cultural boundaries, and more specifically on a small subset of the cultural signals that are used to draw cultural boundaries, again evidence suggests that members of the French upper-middle class draw boundaries on the basis of moral and socioeconomic standing almost as frequently as they do on the basis of cultural standing. Second, as suggested above, whereas sociologists also have often argued that cultural capital is a major basis of exclusion in the United States, the data I collected indicates that American upper-middle-class members stress socioeconomic and moral boundaries more than they do cultural boundaries; this is not the case in France where moral and cultural boundaries are slightly more important than socioeconomic boundaries; the differences are becoming less accentuated: data suggest that socioeconomic boundaries are gaining importance in both countries while cultural boundaries appear to be losing in importance in the United States and possibly in France.

The implications of these findings for the metatheoretical assumptions of Marxist, structuralist, and rational choice theorists are discussed. In particular, my findings shed doubt on the ontological models of human nature central to these approaches, as the latter assumes that human beings give analytical primacy to socioeconomic resources (and boundaries or status) over other types of resources. The implications of my findings for the influential contribution of Pierre Bourdieu are also

analyzed; the work of this French sociologist now represents one of the most influential trends in the sociology of culture and in cultural anthropology. My data suggest that Bourdieu greatly underestimates the importance of moral boundaries while he exaggerates the importance of cultural and socioeconomic boundaries. In addition, assumptions that are central to his concepts of power fields are contradicted by my data. Some of these criticisms will be briefly introduced in the first chapters of this volume, but they will be brought together at the end of the book.

This study pursues three additional goals. First, it attempts to clarify the relationship between symbolic boundaries and inequality by specifying whether and under what conditions the boundaries drawn by the interviewees could lead to class reproduction. Second, it provides a multicausal explanation for differences in boundary work across groups. Finally, it documents variations in boundary work *within* the French and the American upper-middle class in the process of explaining intergroup differences in boundary work.

To study the potential impact of symbolic boundaries on inequality, I discuss their formal features or structure, i.e., the degree to which they are rigidly defined and widely shared by a population. Comparing the French and the American cases, I will show that cultural boundaries, i.e., boundaries drawn on the basis of education, intelligence, refinement, and cosmopolitanism, are much more loosely defined in the United States than they are in France.¹⁵ This directly influences the ways in which culture shapes inequality in each country as it affects whether boundaries create hierarchization and exclusion rather than simply differentiation. Instead of assuming that symbolic boundaries directly lead to exclusion, we need to view them as a necessary but insufficient condition for the creation of inequality, and exclusion itself, as the frequent unintended effect of the process of defining self-identity.

In this context it should be noted that this study could potentially complement the neo-Durkheimian, and mostly American, literature on symbolic boundaries. This literature has tended to focus on social control and to predefine all symbolic boundaries as moral boundaries,¹⁶ thereby neglecting to analyze differences between various types of boundaries.¹⁷ This research tradition has also looked at symbolic boundaries to analyze cultural codes.¹⁸ With a few exceptions, it has paid little attention to the potential role played by symbolic boundaries in group formation and in the production of inequality.¹⁹ It has also neglected to study how *groups* draw boundaries in the process of defining their own identity, ideology, and status against that of other groups. This study brings together the neo-Durkheimian literature that focuses on cultural codes, with the French literature concerning class cultures and inequality.

Using comparative data, it is argued that the content of symbolic boundaries that people draw, and particularly the relative salience of moral, socioeconomic, and cultural boundaries, varies with the cultural resources that individuals have access to and with the structural conditions in which they are placed. These resources include those made available by national historical traditions (e.g., the core values of “Americanism”: egalitarianism, individualism, and achievement) and by various sectors of cultural production and diffusion (the educational system, the mass media), while proximate and remote structural conditions include the market position of upper-middle-class members as well as the general structural features of the society in which they live. While a number of social scientists account for the features of cultural systems that individuals uphold by their interests, the volume and composition of their resources (or capital), or the structure of their group,²⁰ these factors need to be supplemented by looking at the “cultural supply side,” i.e., at the cultural resources that are made available to individuals for boundary work. As pointed out by neo-institutional theorists and others, individuals do not exclusively draw boundaries out of their own experience: they borrow from the general cultural repertoires supplied to them by the society in which they live, relying on gener-

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