

How to Publish, but Most Importantly, Why

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Published: May 8, 2019

Abstract

This essay responds to an invitation by the editors of *Sociologica* to write about publication strategy.

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Michèle Lamont is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University. Her research addresses culture and inequality, racism and stigma, academia and knowledge, social change and successful societies, and qualitative methods. A former president of the American Sociological Association, she is the recent recipient of the Erasmus Prize and the Gutenberg Prize. In 2019–2020 she will be a Russell Sage Foundation Visiting Scholar and Andrew Carnegie Fellow and will write a book tentatively titled *Worthy: Renewing Hope to Address the Current Social Crisis*.

First, how do you know when a manuscript is ready to go?

I am anal-retentive. I think on paper, which means that I go through a great many passes that (in my mind at least) lead to qualitative shifts in the elaboration and clarity of my argument and in its insertion in the literature. I aim to do this until the deadline hits. I feel quite anxious about meeting deadlines.

An obvious second question is about books versus articles or chapters in edited volumes.

I far prefer writing monographs because they allow me to set the terms of the discussion and I am less likely to be the victim of capricious reviewers than I would be if I submitted articles. But most importantly, I get a lot of satisfaction from developing book-length arguments. One can go deeper in elaborating an explanation with a book. There is nothing like it in terms of sheer intellectual joy.

But also what about publishing in established outlets versus new journal ventures?

I have generally preferred writing what I want to write and placing papers in journals that may be less finicky, over publishing in the top two journals. This has allowed me to develop an intellectual agenda that is more cohesive than it would be had I spent much of my time pleasing random reviewers. I have very rarely sent papers out to *ASR* and *AJS* perhaps because I did not want to spend years pushing a single paper. But I have also gone for leading specialty journals such as *Social Science & Medicine* and *Socio-Economic Review* to engage in a conversation with new audiences.

Have you edited a volume or special issue of a journal?

I have done both. I have been very lucky with some of my collective volumes (e.g., Lamont & Thevenot, 2000; Lamont & Fournier, 1992). At this time, I am not interested in editing volumes anymore (even when I have splendid material, as was the case recently with a conference on the middle class in comparative perspective that I organized in fall 2018). This is because edited volumes don't circulate enough. They easily go unnoticed. I would rather do a special issue of a journal as these can be promoted digitally, and indeed I edit issues regularly. It's stimulating to bring colleagues together around a specific topic. For instance, I have coedited with Paul Pierson an issue of *Daedalus* on "Inequality as a Multidimensional Process" which will come out this summer. It brings together leading political scientists, psychologists and sociology to bridge the micro, meso and macro levels in the study of inequality. This came out of the meetings of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research's Successful Societies program, which I have co-directed since 2002. It is our last act...

In general about publication strategy, what advice would you give to a young aspiring sociologist?

At the start of a career, you have no choice; if you want to be a part of the disciplinary conversation you have to go for the journals that have the most visibility. I was extremely lucky that my very first paper in English, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida," came out in the *American Journal of Sociology*. It was a tongue-in-cheek article and it became famous quite rapidly.

But young scholars should keep in mind that what truly matters is not where you publish but what you publish: the work should be original, daring, stimulating. Otherwise it is not worth doing... and it is unlikely to interest others. Doing exciting work opens all doors.

This is in part why one should aim to publish... it keeps the creative juices flowing, may influence how we understand the world, and may even contribute to shaping it...

Additionally you might want to comment on the current state of academic publishing in sociology.

The situation in sociology is not that bad, all things considered: there is a good market for non-fiction books, and we have strong editors at several university presses. The interest from trade publishers is growing, especially in this Trumpian moment. We have a number of good journals. Of course, some of the top journals are much too slow and this has clearly had a detrimental effect on the careers of some of our excellent qualitative, comparative-historical, culture types — which is absolutely unacceptable. I can't wait for such journals to get their act together!

References

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