

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Michèle Lamont, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, 336 pp. \$US 27.95 hardcover (978-0-674-03266-8)

How do academics define excellence? How do scholars from different disciplines judge the quality of research proposals and how do they manage to agree about the “best” ones? During the review process, does “the cream” rise naturally to the top? Is the peer review process “fair”? How does it handle the tensions between excellence and diversity, and between meritocracy and democracy?

These are the questions Michèle Lamont wishes to answer in *How Professors Think*, on the basis of an empirical study of peer review in multi-disciplinary humanities and social science grant competitions in the US. Lamont targeted five national funding competitions and 12 multi-disciplinary panels charged with distributing fellowships and grants to faculty members and graduate students in support of scholarly research. Over a 2-year period, Lamont conducted 81 interviews with panelists and with the panels’ program officers and chairpersons. She was also able to observe three of the panels. The panelists she interviewed came from the following disciplines: history (14), literature (7), anthropology (7), political science (6), sociology (6), anthropology (5), musicology (3), art history (2), economics (2), classics (2), philosophy (2), geography (1) and evolutionary biology (1). The semi-structured interviews (conducted over the phone within a few hours or a few days of panel deliberations) focused on “the arguments that panelists had made for and against specific proposals, their views about the outcomes of the competition, and the thinking behind the ranking of proposals” (p. 13), and also on how they recognized excellence in their students and colleagues, whether they believe in academic excellence, whether they thought that “the cream rises to the top,” etc. The 15 interviews with program officers and chairpersons provided details about what had happened during the panel deliberation (since direct observation was impossible for 9 of the 12 panels).

“Excellence,” “quality,” or “originality” are not defined in the same ways by scholars from different disciplines. This hardly comes as a surprise, but Lamont’s account of “disciplinary cultures” offers a more sys-

tematic review of these differences. Based on her previous work about epistemological styles (preferences for particular ways of understanding how to build knowledge, beliefs about the possibility of proving theories, etc.), Lamont characterizes the definitions of excellence and what she calls the “evaluative cultures” of six disciplines: philosophy, English literature, history, anthropology, political science and economics. This part of the book (ch. 3), however, is hardly based on her empirical data (the number of respondents in each discipline — for example 2 in economics — is too low to make any conclusive statement about disciplinary cultures). Rather, it is based on “widely accepted views that academics hold about the evaluative and epistemic culture of their own field and those of other fields” (p. 54). These widely accepted views are, for example, the “gulf of mutual incomprehension” between social scientists and humanists regarding the place of subjectivity in the pursuit of knowledge, economists’ unawareness of the “constructed nature of excellence,” or the split within the social sciences between fields where empiricism is favored (sociology, political science and economics) and those who value interpretation (anthropology and history). Although aspects of Lamont’s account of these disciplinary differences could certainly be debated, the point that disciplinary cultures heavily weigh on “how professors think” and, in particular, how they define academic excellence, is crucial.

This crucial point is somewhat lost in the rest of the book, however. Lamont goes on with exhuming the “customary rules of deliberation” the panelists she studied abide by (ch. 4). These rules are not formally spelled out. Instead, they are “created and learned by panelists during their immersion in collective work” (p. 111). The chief rule of deliberation is “cognitive contextualization,” which “requires that panelists use the criteria of evaluation most appropriate to the field or discipline of the proposal under review” (p. 106). It means, thus, that panelists recognize that “different standards should be applied to different disciplines” (p. 106). Deferring to the expertise of others, observing disciplinary sovereignty and maintaining collegiality are the other central rules of deliberation. Breaches of the first two do occur and Lamont notes that these breaches are the most common threat to the maintenance of panels’ collegiality. Following her own line of argument in the third chapter of the book, it should be clear that the propensity for cognitive contextualization, deference to expertise, and respect of disciplinary sovereignty is bound to vary from one field to the other, a point that Lamont, unfortunately, chose not to address.

The “various kinds of excellence” favored by panelists are the object of the fifth chapter of the book, which explores the relative salience

of formal and informal criteria used by scholars in the course of their evaluation. Criteria for recognizing excellence — clarity, quality, originality, significance, methods and feasibility — have multiple meanings and their relative importance vary. Here Lamont focuses on differences between disciplinary clusters — the humanities, the social sciences, and history — as opposed to differences between and within individual disciplines. Among her respondents, “significance and originality stands out as the most important of the formal criteria used” (p. 199). Apart from these formal criteria, Lamont shows that informal standards such as elegance and cultural capital, as well as moral qualities of the applicant, such as determination, humility and authenticity play an important role in evaluation. Forty-one percent of the respondents refer to applicants’ moral qualities when assessing proposals, “enough to support the conclusion that doing so is not exceptional, but part of the normal order of things” (p. 195). Although moral considerations and class signals such as elegance and “cultural capital” are “somewhat antithetical to a merit-based award system, [they] are intrinsic to the process of evaluation in academia” (p. 161).

All things considered, Lamont’s view of the peer-review system is a contented one, although she believes it to be impossible to reach a definite conclusion concerning the fairness of the system as a whole (p. 7). The peer-review system that emerges from her analysis is an imperfect but satisfactory one. She aimed to “combat intellectual cynicism” (p. 10) and indeed, she shows that scholars in multidisciplinary panels manage to reach a “pragmatic fairness” which is apparently the best we can hope for. Her somewhat expedited treatment of the “excellence-versus-diversity-dilemma” in the sixth chapter illustrates her generally optimistic position: merit and diversity act as complementary criteria, rather than alternative standards of evaluation. In the same vein, her study shows that evaluation is a deeply emotional and interactional process, in which extracognitive dimensions are intrinsic and should not be seen as corrupting influences. Homophilic judgments (the tendency to favor one’s one type of research) are pervasive in the evaluation process but should not worry us too much. Standards of excellence vary greatly from one discipline to the other, but the solution is to embrace multidimensional definitions of excellence and originality. Given the complete black-out Lamont puts on disciplinary and institutional power relationships, we almost end up believing her. Bourdieu, whose work Lamont is highly familiar with from her years at the Université de Paris, and whom she cites generously, only to deplore his exclusive focus on competition and conflicting interests, must be spinning in his grave.

What I find most disturbing about Lamont's book, however, is the comfort she seems to take in her overarching conclusion that trust in the system is essential to its correct functioning (p. 7). A belief in the relative fairness and openness of the peer review system is crucial to its vitality. Participants' — panelists, applicants, non-applicants — faith in the system has a tremendous influence on how well it works. Lamont compares these performative effects of positing a meritocratic system to those having faith in the market: "the belief creates the conditions of its own existence" (p. 241). The current economic crisis, however, has revealed the devastating consequences of an "excess of faith" in the economic system. I believe we should refrain from an "excess of faith" in the academic system, despite Lamont's exhortation.

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