

# Academic Cultures, Think Tanks, and the Evaluation of Excellence in Spain, the European Union, and the United States. A Symposium on Michèle Lamont's *How Professors Think*\*

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As we were finalizing the introduction to this symposium in late May, a controversy about the academic evaluation system in Spain made headlines internationally and became the topic of discussion in social media. A thirty-year old Spanish physicist had applied for the Ramón y Cajal scholarship—designed to repatriate national scientists—and his application was rejected. The rejection was not unusual since the Ramón y Cajal committee receives scores of first-rate applications annually. But allegedly, soon after being notified of the rejection, he received the prize for best young experimental physicist in Europe, awarded every other year by the European Physical Society.

Media across the political spectrum quickly jumped to conclusions and portrayed the young physicist as a victim of the deficiencies of the academic evaluation system in Spain.<sup>1</sup> “Secrets of the universe,” as a newspaper acidly put it, “are sim-

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1. “El mejor físico europeo joven se queda sin beca en España.” *El país* (May 14, 2013). <[http://sociedad.elpais.com/sociedad/2013/05/14/actualidad/1368559891\\_700327.html](http://sociedad.elpais.com/sociedad/2013/05/14/actualidad/1368559891_700327.html)>. Accessed on May 19. “España cierra las puertas al mejor físico joven de Europa.” *El mundo* (May 14, 2013). <<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2013/05/14/ciencia/1368531982.html>>. Accessed on May 19, 2013. “España rechaza al mejor físico joven de Europa, un gallego.” *ABC* (May 14, 2013). <<http://www.abc.es/ciencia/20130514/abci-espana-rechaza-mejor-fisico-201305141544.html>>. Accessed on May 19, 2013.

pler to explain than Spanish committee decisions.”<sup>2</sup> Not only were the members of the Ramón y Cajal committee not given the benefit of the doubt, but more importantly, public reactions to the case silenced the basic fact that the European Physical Society awards are also decided by a committee, whose criteria do not necessarily resemble the ones the Ramón y Cajal committee uses. In other words, the public ignored that both committees operate within different academic evaluative cultures.

By taking as a nexus Michèle Lamont’s *How Professors Think* (2009), the goal of this symposium is precisely to understand the logic and dynamics behind evaluative cultures. In the book Lamont seeks to open the black box of academic evaluative cultures (in her case in the United States) to make sense of different standards and the meanings attributed to them by evaluators. As public reactions to the controversy demonstrated, paying attention to these meanings and the professional context in which they are produced is crucial to challenging deep-rooted views in Spain about its academic peer review system as faulty and opaque. Although some important problems persist, the contributions of Amparo Lasén and Celia Valiente present a more realistic and grounded analysis of the inner workings of the Spanish system. Díez Medrano’s contribution inserts Spain within the larger European evaluative culture and compares both to the U.S. system. And Thomas Medvetz offers a revealing comparison between academic peer review and the knowledge-production culture of think tanks.

Since its publication in 2009, *How Professors Think* (soon to be translated into Spanish) has prompted debates in academic fora in the United States, France, and Italy.<sup>3</sup> What can Spain add to this ongoing conversation, especia-

2. TALLANTYRE, Steve (2013). “Spain Shuns Europe’s Top Physicist.” *The Local* (May 14, 2013). <<http://www.thelocal.es/20130514/top-physicist-in-europe-not-good-enough-for-spain#.UZfOOUoayIA>>. Accessed on May 19, 2013.
3. FREED, Jann (2009). *The Review of Higher Education*, 33 (1), 124-126; JASCHIK, Scott (2009). “The ‘Black Box’ of Peer Review” *Inside Higher Ed* (March 4); MESNY, Anne (2009). *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*, 34 (4), 1134-1137; URBACH, Julie (2009). “L’expertise des chercheurs doit être au centre du dispositif d’évaluation”, *nonfiction.fr: Le quotidien des livres et des idées* (March 30); WHITLEY, Richard (2009) *Minerva*, 47: 469-472. WINKLER, Karen (2009). “Reviewing the Reviewers: A Q&A with Michèle Lamont”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 3); CARROLL, Aileen (2010) *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61 (2), 393-394; COHEN, Patricia (2010) “Scholars Test Web Alternative to Peer Review”, *The New York Times* (August 23); FISHER, Saul (2010). “Arriving at Norms of Scholarly Judgment”, *Social Studies of Science*, 40 (3), 485-491; FRESCHI, Anna Carola & SANTORO, Marco (eds.) (2010). “Thinking Academic Evaluation after Michèle Lamont’s *How Professors Think*”, *Sociologica. Italian Journal of Sociology*, 3; GERSON, Elihu (2010). *Isis*, 101 (3), 676-677; PICKERING, Andrew (2010). *American Journal of Sociology*, 115 (6), 1908-1910; DAYÉ, Christian (2011). *Science Technology Human Values*, 36, 413-416; DUVOUX, Nicolas; TENRETM Elise & VEZINAT, Nadège (2011). “Retrouver le sens de la vie sociale”, *La vie des idées* (May 20); LANGFELDT, Liv (2011). *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 25 (1), 92-95; KAZEPOV, Yuri; SAVINI, Federico; CATENA, Leonardo, HONGBO, Zhang, OLEG, Komlik & AGODI, Maria (2011). “Discussion on Michèle Lamont’s *How Professors Think*”, *Sociologica. Italian Journal of Sociology*, <[http://www.sociologica.mulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS\\_ITEM:244](http://www.sociologica.mulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS_ITEM:244)>. Accessed on May 20, 2013. We thank Thomas Medvetz for bringing to our attention several of these texts. For a review in Spanish, see SANTANA-ACUÑA, Alvaro (2012). *Revista española de investigaciones sociológicas*, 140, 173-177.

lly now, when the country is immersed in a deep economic crisis? Valiente's and Lasén's answer is to detail how austerity economics (which have led to major cuts in research funding, including the Ramón y Cajal scholarships) are transforming the practices of peer review panels. For instance, application forms have recently changed to reflect funding cuts, making it more difficult for certain types of applicants to score better during the evaluation process. Their contributions also show how committed Spanish panelists are striving to redefine academic excellence in times of economic uncertainty. Díez Medrano points out that, if we leave aside for a moment the asymmetries in research resources, Spain's peer review culture shares numerous similarities with leading European research countries such as Germany. And Medvetz's contribution is well-timed, for in Spain, research- and policy-oriented think tanks are making their way into public opinion and governmental circles and thus competing, as occurs in the United States, against academics for the production of socially relevant knowledge.

These contributions also confirm the rising global convergence of academic evaluative cultures. For that reason, we believe that this symposium should not be addressed only to Spanish and European scholars interested in expert evaluative cultures, but also to policymakers concerned with the unfolding reforms of the European and national higher education systems, in which peer review functions (or should function) as the backbone. Across the Atlantic, U.S. readers, due to mounting financial constraints in research and academia (Bernstein 2012), could gain better insight into how national experts have to negotiate the continuous interference of public agencies, upon which they depend for funding, and especially how they struggle to reward academic excellence while facing growing budgetary restrictions.

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Michèle Lamont's *How Professors Think* investigates the social construction of academic definitions of excellence in U.S. peer review panels, in which experts convene to evaluate fellowship and grant proposals. The book opens with a detailed introduction to the object of study and it concludes with a brief discussion about the implications of the U.S. peer review system for Europe (ch. 7). Throughout the book, readers learn in detail about the functioning of peer review panels (ch. 2) and about the academic culture of each of the participating disciplines and, especially, about disciplinary boundaries (ch. 3). Lamont explains how panelists navigate such boundaries during the review process in order to reach a working consensus on how to define academic excellence (ch. 4). That collective definition underlies panelists' decisions about which proposals deserve and do not deserve funding (ch. 5). But, as Lamont reminds us, during the course of their interactions, panelists need to take into consideration that their definition of excellence cannot be so personal as to endanger interdisciplinarity and the diversity of funded proposals (ch. 6).

According to Lamont, accounting for all these different situations and constraints requires a new approach to the production of excellence in general and to peer review in particular. Researchers following the Mertonian and Bourdieusian traditions have focused on the cognitive factors underlying evaluation and hence they maintain that non-cognitive factors (e.g., emotions) corrupt the evaluative process. Lamont observes, on the contrary, that non-cognitive factors at work during peer review are critical to producing a group consensus on the definition of excellence. Thus, a central task of the new approach must be to analyze how the meaning of evaluative categories emerges.

In the panels described by Lamont, evaluative meaning is born out of a fragile consensus, which is bolstered by panelists' interactions. Each of the panels she studied had to develop its own group style, which was not shaped exclusively by cognitive factors, but also—and especially—by non-cognitive factors (e.g., emotional work). As a result, the definition of excellence is morally mediated by the meanings experts confer to the categories they use to evaluate a project as excellent. According to Lamont, the most salient criteria for assessing excellence are clarity, quality, significance, methods, feasibility, and originality. The latter is central across the humanities and the social sciences.

Despite the development of different evaluative group styles, peer review norms were in general respected, and the interviewed panelists agreed that the system works. Yet they acknowledged that certain practices can skew deliberations, especially, alliance formation, strategic voting, and horse-trading. Along with the tension produced by experts' disciplinary baggage and the interdisciplinary context of the panel, Lamont analyzed another crucial tension: how to combine academic meritocracy with the democratic practice of plurality, in other words, how to recognize academic excellence while respecting the diversity of funded proposals. Lamont finds that peer review succeeds in the United States thanks to the geographic and institutional dispersion of its academic world. This makes difficult an excessive control through personal networks, while facilitating the anonymity of evaluations. In the European case, it remains to be seen whether the development of a unified evaluative culture could gradually replace the kind of local academic networks that dominate nationally and regionally.

In his contribution, Juan Díez Medrano tackles Lamont's questions: What are the prospects for the reproduction of the U.S. evaluative culture in the European Union? Would a distinctive E.U. evaluative culture emerge in the years to come? Díez Medrano argues that convergence between the United States and the European Union is already taking place, but with major differences. The relative insulation of U.S. universities from the rest of society and the more structured character of their doctoral programs have given rise to a relatively homogeneous evaluative culture that facilitates cross-national conversations to a degree rarely found in Europe. The national cultures behind disciplinary boundaries and current reforms of postgraduate degrees in the E.U. constitute a major obstacle to achieving the shared evaluative criteria necessary for a Europe-wide peer review system. As for Spain, Díez Medrano

indicates that its evaluative culture in the social sciences has started to change and hence is growing more similar to other national evaluative cultures. Yet he suggests that Spain could be different in its strong emphasis on detailed description and social and policy significance as the main criteria of excellence.

Meritocracy, Amparo Lasén contends, is more desirable than ever in a time of research funding cuts. Lasén speaks from experience: she is currently a member of the social sciences coordination team of the Agencia Nacional de Evaluación y Prospectiva, a public institution belonging to the State Secretary for Research, Development and Innovation. To evaluate the excellence of research proposals, she and her teammates rely on similar criteria as those studied by Lamont in the United States (originality, feasibility, social and scientific interest). Likewise, since there is no *a priori* consensus among panelists on how to define these criteria, non-cognitive factors (especially panelists' personal and collective interactive qualities) are decisive for the success and fairness of the evaluative process. For Lasén, a key difference between both systems is how institutions constrain the production and definition of excellence. Whereas in the United States, fellowship and research grant programs are funded mainly by independent or private organizations, in Spain the main funding institutions are public, state agencies. For her, the current economic crisis in Spain jeopardizes its peer review system since political decisions, by cutting research funds, are creating a new pattern that privileges the excellence of trajectories rather than the excellence in research proposals and contributions. Yet Lasén suggests that the scarcity of academic resources might not only be Spain's fault. Rather, the globalization of standards used to measure excellence might also be adding to such scarcity.

How does the practice of academic peer review described by Lamont compare to policy research as practiced in the world of public policy think tanks? In tackling this question, Thomas Medvetz also elaborates on what the book can teach us about the cognitive autonomy of U.S. scholars from external political and economic forces. Defining cognitive autonomy as a social, generative, and conditional property, he argues that the differences between think tanks and academic peer review panels vastly outweigh their similarities. For instance, peer review is basically absent among think tanks. However, when the production of policy relevant knowledge is at stake, academic peer reviewers and think tank experts are major rivals. This overlap leads to important but overlooked similarities. Judgments of excellence do not arise from cognitive factors in either setting, and, in the case of think tanks, outside factors also shape the process leading to the production of policy knowledge. A no less meaningful similarity is the existence of a discernible social order to each setting, which is largely mediated by social and interactional dynamics. By exploring the wider social ecology of knowledge production in the United States, Medvetz's contribution challenges dominant views on cognitive autonomy.

According to Celia Valiente, the organizational structures for funding quality research are similar to those analyzed in *How Professors Think*. Yet in order to institutionalize a meritocratic system in actual academic practice, peer review

in Spain has to overcome three major problems. First, although the situation is changing slowly, most Spanish scholars belong to local and clientelistic professional networks. Second, the selection of qualified panelists remains a daunting task. Whereas in the United States their selection is unproblematic, in Spain the pool of first-class scholars is comparatively small, and the lack of a tradition of service to the academic community provides no incentives to qualified scholars to become involved as screeners or panelists. And third, the specter of clientelism haunts the system. Whereas in the U.S. cases analyzed by Lamont, panelists respect the authority of fellow panelists over their disciplines, Valiente explains that in Spain, panelists might step into the territory of disciplines beyond their expertise in order to prevent non-meritocratic practices such as clientelism.

In her response, Michèle Lamont admits that revisiting *How Professors Think* across occupational and national contexts raises important challenges while confirming some of her findings on evaluative cultures in Canada, China, Finland, and France. On the mismanagement of peer review by public administrators in charge of overseeing the system, as described by Lasén, Lamont points out that the Spanish case is not different from France. There, administrative interference risks tarnishing the legitimacy of research evaluation. To overcome this interference, Lamont suggests that Spanish scholars “need to show the way” to foster more universalistic academic communities. In response to Lasén’s interest in a more meritocratic environment for junior researchers, Spain could follow the example of Canada, where less weight is given to candidates’ past record in favor of their research proposals. On the difficulties of finding qualified and disinterested reviewers, as detailed by Valiente, Lamont gives the example of the British Economic and Social Research Council, which selects, trains, and rewards members of a college of assessors. Such an institution could raise the standards for peer review in Spain. For Lamont, Díez Medrano’s contribution contains important insights on how to reform the peer review system while avoiding the perils of the over-quantification of excellence measurement (as occurred in France). His contribution also leads to new questions worth investigating: is the ideal community of readers Díez Medrano describes more homogeneous in the United States than in the European Union? How does disciplinary consensus translate into interdisciplinary deference? What is distinctive about the relationship between types of diversity and constructions of excellence in E.U. research? Finally, Lamont further elaborates on the similarities and differences between the worlds of academic peer reviewers and think-tank policy experts. As Medvetz indicates, peer review does not matter in the latter, and Lamont also agrees that in both worlds merit is based on “social and interactional dynamics.” But she argues that, from a radical interactionist perspective, cognitive autonomy is enabled by taken for granted agreements about ways to achieve it, and that such a perspective suggests more similarities than differences between the two worlds.

Taken together, these five contributions expand our understanding of the wider context of knowledge production in Spain, the European Union, and

the United States. By showing that evaluation (in the worlds of peer review and policy research) is decisively mediated by non-cognitive factors, the contributions can inform the improvement of peer review standards in Spain and elsewhere in Europe and, in so doing, overcome entrenched views (especially in the media) about peer review opacity and secrecy. By comparing Spain to the European Union and the United States, the contributions also provide a better understanding of peer review as a historical technology for the production of disciplinary experts. In this area, *How Professors Think* constitutes an exceptional document about the ascent and institutionalization of academic diversity—an offspring of the pluralism developed in U.S. universities in the 1950s (Loss 2012).

As for the immediate future of peer review, it remains unclear how it will surmount the global economic crisis and how it will negotiate the challenges posed by non-academic and increasingly powerful organizations such as think tanks. Perhaps, the future (at least in Europe) holds a stronger integration of academia into civil society and the development of a “knowledge society.” This is, for instance, the goal of Atomium Culture,<sup>4</sup> a Europe-wide initiative launched in 2009 that brings together twenty-six universities, over one million students, seventeen newspapers (with ten million readers) and an array of businesses with a total turnover of 720 billion Euros. This is one of several ongoing efforts to develop platforms for European excellence and move toward an integrated academic space.

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4. <<http://atomiumculture.eu>>. Accessed May 22, 2013.