

# How the Spanish Peer-Review System Works: A Comparison with the United States System

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In her insightful book, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*, Michèle Lamont analyzes how interdisciplinary panels in the United States select research proposals and fellowship applications to be funded in the humanities and social sciences. She studies how this type of academic judgment works not only in theory but also in practice. Her methods include in-depth interviews with scholars and officials that participate in national funding competitions and direct observation of panelists' deliberations in face-to-face meetings. In the seventh (and final) chapter of her penetrating book, Lamont invites scholars to reflect about the conditions that in the United States permit the functioning of such peer-review system, since these conditions may be absent in other countries. In my contribution, I follow her invitation by using Spain as the contrasting empirical case. I will argue that in this case, formal structures for selecting quality research for funding are similar (but not identical) to those analyzed in *How Professors Think*. Yet, due to the lack of decisive conditions that sustain the U.S. system, the real functioning of the formal structures in Spain is riddled with difficulties. Thus, the strengths, problems, and challenges identified by Lamont in the U.S. system necessarily differ from those pertaining to the Spanish system.

My contribution primarily relies on my experience as an academic program officer on gender studies for the Spanish National Research Plan since 2010; as a screener and panelist on gender studies and social sciences programs for the Spanish National Research Plan in 2004 and 2009; and as an academic program officer on gender studies for another Spanish national funding competition in 2009. Before I start, I would like to clarify that my contribution expresses my own views on the Spanish system and by no means those of the research funding institutions I collaborate with. Finally, I circumscribe my

views to judgment of research proposals (and not fellowship applications) in the humanities and social sciences, which are the disciplinary areas covered by *How Professors Think*.

In chapter one, Lamont presents her case study and analytical methods, and in what follows, she describes the formal rules that guide academic judgment by panels in charge of funding grant proposals and fellowship applications. As mentioned earlier, these formal rules in the United States are quite analogous to those existing in Spain. Let me illustrate this point by referring to the research grant program funded by the Spanish National Research Plan—a competition administered by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. Research teams are asked to present grant applications and compete for funding. The Department of the Humanities and Social Sciences within the Ministry sets up panels called commissions (*comisiones*) that review grant proposals. Panelists are supposed to be well-established scholars in their respective fields. After having previously assessed applications, panelists meet for one or two days to discuss the proposals. The purpose of this face-to-face meeting is to put together the final list of research projects to be funded. This process is approximately as formal as the one described by Lamont.<sup>1</sup>

Some features of the Spanish scientific community make difficult in practice the smooth functioning of the formal rules of the academic judgment system described above. Although several humanists and social scientists belong to (or are connected with) top international research circles—publishing articles in first-tier peer-reviewed journals and/or publishing books with leading international university presses—, unfortunately, they are more the exception than the rule. The majority of Spanish scholars move inside local networks that are particularistic, clientelistic, and lacking international-connections. (Nevertheless the landscape is timidly changing.) As a result, the pool of scholars that can assess the work of their peers in a knowledgeable and disinterested way is quite small. In addition, setting aside important exceptions, the average quality of grant proposals tends to be low. These two characteristics pose grave problems in a key stage of the process of academic judgment: the selection of panelists. Lamont does not present this key stage as particularly problematic in the United States. In fact, she does not spend much space in her book dealing with the issue. Rather, *How Professors Think* presents the U.S. scientific community as one formed by numerous top scholars. And in general, she portrays U.S. scholars as academics willing to act as panelists and perform this task without remuneration (pp. 35, 37). The motives behind their decision to act as panelists are diverse, and include enjoying reading well-crafted proposals and working side-by-side with talented and accomplished colleagues (p. 109). The confidentiality clause seems to be respected by all people involved in the

1. There are differences between the U.S. and the Spanish systems. For instance, in Spain, panelists receive a small honorarium. Yet similarities between the two formal systems clearly outnumber differences.

process of academic judgment (p. 2). A tradition of service to the academic community compels scholars to participate as screeners or panelists on top of their many other professional responsibilities. In contrast, selecting panelists in Spain is a very hard task due to the small pool of first-class scholars. In fact, the latter might not find it particularly appealing to serve as panelists given the average low quality of proposals (although a limited number of them are excellent), and some also fear that the confidentiality clause may not always be respected. Furthermore, the culture of academic service is not deeply established—many scholars do not think of themselves as active members of a wide scientific community, but rather as members of local networks, or, in some cases, simply as isolated scholars more concerned with teaching than with research. Given these difficulties in recruiting the best scholars as panelists, panels may end up being formed not only by outstanding academics but actually by less qualified professionals.

In Chapter 4, Lamont analyzes a particularly salient issue: how panels deal in real life with the fact that panelists (and proposals and applications) come from different disciplines. Each discipline has its own quality standards, which in principle stands as an obstacle to reaching consensus when interdisciplinary panels have to decide which proposals and applications deserve funding. Lamont argues that consensus can be reached because panelists accept that each proposal should be judged according to the standards of its own discipline (what she calls “cognitive contextualization” [pp. 106, 132]). Furthermore, in the process of deliberating on a specific proposal, panelists often permit the views on the proposal by the panelist with expertise in that discipline to prevail (p. 117). Lamont shows that such procedures are informal, in the sense that they are not written in books but instead produced by panelists while interacting with each other (p. 111). These procedural rules are practical and help panelists to finish their work in time and make funding decisions (or funding recommendations) at the end of the face-to-face meeting. These rules also permit panelists to conceptualize panel peer-review not as a perfect process but as one that is good enough to identify projects that merit funding. In my view, Lamont makes a convincing case about the efficiency of these informal rules in the United States, where panelists are usually top scholars in their fields, have internalized universalistic principles, and are used to meritocratic peer-review. But it is questionable that these informal rules could be applied in other countries. In national contexts where important sectors of the academic community are particularistic (and therefore non-meritocratic), informal rules may foster clientelism. In these contexts, it is expected that some panelists do not respect other panelists’ authority over their own discipline, but rather intervene in disciplines where they are not experts in order to prevent corruption. To be fair to Lamont’s analysis, she explicitly acknowledges that “[b]ecause scholarly expertise is superposed onto the social networks of those who produce knowledge, it is impossible to eliminate the effect of interpersonal relationships, including clientelism, on the evaluation process” (pp. 127-28). In fact, she explains that, even in contexts that are usually meritocratic, academics that

come from oppressed minorities are right to defend the use of consistent criteria across disciplines and for all proposals (p. 144). This is exactly the course that I would recommend for Spain.

The various kinds of excellence identified by interdisciplinary panels are the subject of chapter 5. The two strengths that panelists report to appreciate most while judging proposals are significance and originality (p. 167). This is understandable in the U.S. context, since the quality of proposals is high and many applicants are seasoned researchers. In such a high-quality context, some features of the proposals can be taken for granted, such as “feasibility” or adequate methodology. However, in other scientific contexts, the quality of many proposals may not be high. For instance, in a low-quality scenario, panelists’ main task should be to identify which proposals are clear, feasible, and methodologically sound because these characteristics are absent in most applications. Whether projects are “significant” and “original” may not be the most pressing concern guiding panelists.

How panels judge interdisciplinary work and how diversity is injected into the process of academic judgment are central questions in chapter 6. On diversity, Lamont shows that “[p]anelists do consider the racial and gender diversity of awardees, but they also weight their geographical location, the types of institutions where they teach (public/private, elite/non-elite, colleges/research universities), and the range of disciplines they hail from” (p. 213). She clarifies that “for instance, winners cannot all come from a few select institutions in the Northeast” (p. 204). This insightful chapter reminds us that academic judgment occurs in (and is affected by) specific social and political contexts. Diversity is also inserted in peer-review assessments of research in other countries. In Spain, due to the political salience of nationalism, the geographical location of funded panelists and proposals is often expected to be diverse. For example, it would be odd (and inappropriate) that all panelists and all funded proposals come from institutions located in the capital, Madrid. Yet only certain types of diversity are incorporated to the process. The overwhelming majority of panelists and funded projects come from public universities and research centers. But I have never heard anybody commenting on this fact or suggesting that private universities should be more present in the system of academic judgment.

In the seventh and final chapter, Lamont sketches the implications of her study in the United States and abroad. For the former, she recommends, among other things, “to educate panelists about how peer evaluation work. It is particularly important to emphasize the dangers of homophily and how it prevents the identification of a wide range of talents” (p. 247).<sup>2</sup> These and other recommendations are perfectly sensible for the U.S. context, but are certainly not the most pressing issue for other contexts such as the Spanish. In scientific systems where meritocratic peer-review is not yet a tradition,

2. At the beginning of *How Professors Think*, homophily is defined as “an appreciation of work that most resembles one’s own” (p. 8).

the priority should be to establish and consolidate this type of practices. For this and other many reasons, I believe that *How Professors Think* is a useful tool in the long-run to advance towards universalistic academic judgment. Lamont's book shows us where we should attempt to arrive, and how to institutionalize a meritocratic system not only on paper but also in actual academic practice.