

SOCIAL STUDIES

Great grants

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Michèle Lamont

HOW PROFESSORS THINK

Inside the curious world of academic judgment

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In the academic world, talented and hard-working people compete freely for grants, which finance research and yield publications, which are in turn sometimes read and cited. Excellent research will deliver prestige and promotion. The market is efficient, even Darwinian. Well, not always, to be sure, perhaps not even very often, but this is the way things are supposed to be in the dominant academic marketplace, the universe of American research universities. Yet, oddly enough, we know rather little about the way in which it actually works. Michèle Lamont's study draws back the curtain on awards for grants and fellowships.

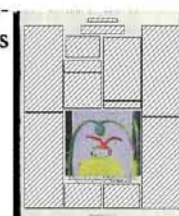
In what is now an established spring ritual, senior academics spend dreary hours scanning cvs, letters of recommendation and research proposals. They then meet to rank applications and agree on the winners. In principle, they are looking for excellence. "But if excellence is ubiquitously evoked", Professor Lamont remarks, "there is little cross-disciplinary consensus about what it means and how it is achieved, especially in the world of research." This is particularly evident in the interdisciplinary panels she studied, which give out grants and fellowships across the humanities and social sciences.

Each discipline has its own take on quality. Economists prize mathematical sophistication and disdain fact-grubbing. Historians love facts. But because they know what they like, and can explain it, historians and economists are disproportionately successful in these competitions. Philosophy does poorly because philosophers can't explain why

apparently impenetrable projects are interesting. Other disciplines suffer because of their internal divisions. Political scientists and sociologists are split between model-builders and ethnographers. American anthropology and geography, once broad churches, are now bitterly divided internally. Their practitioners are insecure about their very disciplinary identity, and have no time for each other's projects. Literary scholars are still reeling from successive bouts of "theory" that left in their wake enduring grudges and grievances. But whatever their domestic quarrels, everyone is suspicious of the claims and ambitions of other disciplines. Unsurprisingly, the last thing that a multi-disciplinary panel can agree on is what makes for an excellent proposal.

In any case, excellence, however defined, is not the only legitimate criterion. Panellists make allowances for elegance, or originality (which must be distinguished from the merely unusual, but may excuse weaknesses in the research design). Some foundations value social importance. Most also favour "diversity", which is taken to mean that a fair but unspecified proportion of awards should go to women, or to members of ethnic minorities, or to candidates from unfashionable state universities, or that some sort of balance should be maintained between representatives of different academic disciplines or schools of thought (though not, in general, between social classes, or liberals and conservatives, or atheists and God-fearing folk). Grant officers insist that the membership of a panel should itself be diverse. "An alternative model, where panellists are selected from among individuals affiliated with the most elite schools, would be unthinkable", Lamont explains. "In the American context, democracy, universalism, and rationality all must be present in the decision process."

A panel selected for its diversity, juggling conflicting criteria, will obviously have difficulty agreeing on the relative value of research projects



which range across different and disparate fields, and that propose a variety of methodological approaches. In any case, panellists have personal agendas. Some want to promote their own disciplines, or to protect ideological allies. Each panellist is likely to favour candidates who remind them of themselves. Interdisciplinary panels have a built-in tendency to factionalism. And yet decisions have to be made, and deadlines met. Lamont is particularly interested in the process, not only the process that determines eventual winners, but the more subtle process by which a panel comes to a pragmatic agreement about criteria.

In practice, various mechanisms facilitate agreement. Panels are selected by a grants officer, sometimes working with a long-term panel chair. They have a clear idea of what they are looking for, as Lamont explains, "Beyond the bottom line – that the panellist 'not be an asshole' – program officers look for academics who demonstrate such key qualities as 'breadth, articulateness, confidence, and friendliness,' along with flexibil-

ity and the ability to work quickly". When the panel convenes, the chairman will try to marginalize abrasive, contentious and unreliable characters, and disciplinary chauvinists. It helps that almost everyone is eager to win the respect of their temporary colleagues. Academics like to be recognized for their cleverness or expertise, but also for their social skills and political nous, which they demonstrate by their ability to see other points of view, and to compromise. New members learn that horse-trading pays off better than intransigence. There is an unspoken rule that you should not question the expertise of other panellists. As the deadline looms, the final, often most contentious, decisions are conceded so that everyone can get back home. Perhaps Lamont underplays the politicking, but the panels that she studied have shifting memberships and short lives, and panellists have less invested in particular outcomes than they would if they were choosing future colleagues.

There is also ideological work to be done. Pragmatic agreements about standards must be negotiated. Deal-making must be glossed. The process must appear legitimate, to the

members of the panel and to the academic constituency. But, after all, academics spend a large part of their working lives grading papers and examining theses. As and Bs are their workaday currency. They find themselves on that panel because they themselves have a string of As, if not A+s, on their cvs. If they can't make distinctions, who can?

A large proportion of applications are weeded out before the panel meets. Panellists then readily agree that a top tier of proposals are truly – in some sense – excellent. The discussions focus on the in-between proposals.

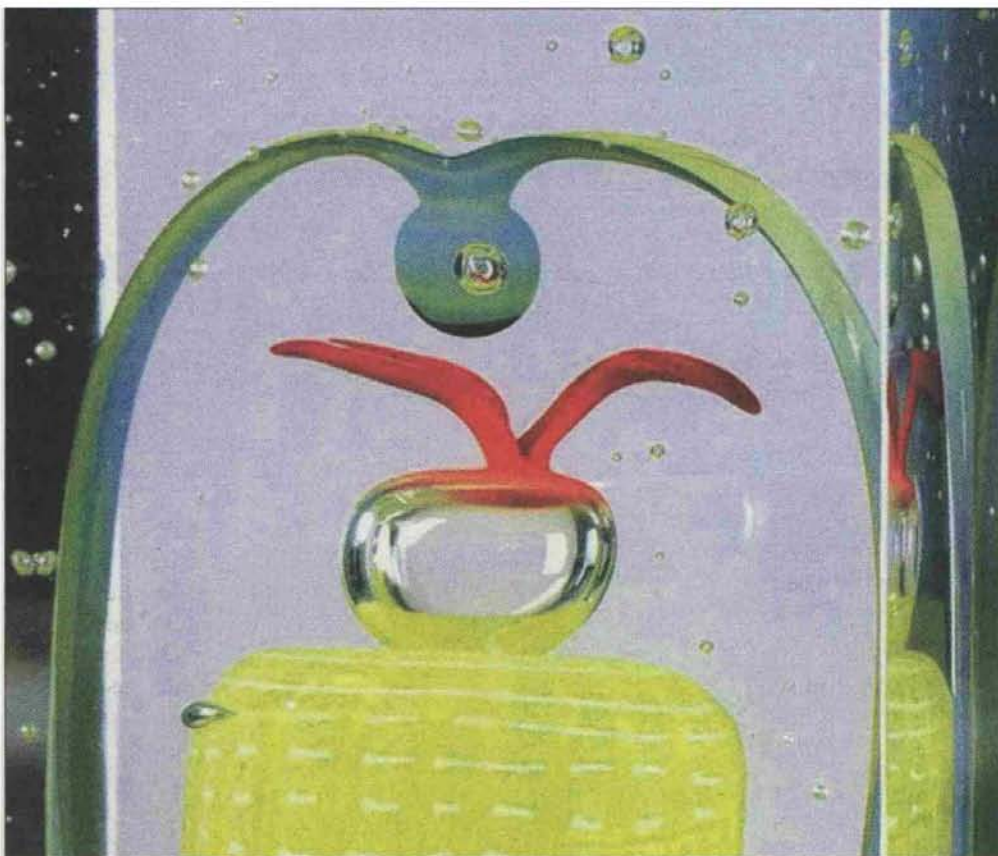
They are acknowledged to be competent, but flawed. Relevant published work has been ignored; methods are open to question; the proposal is poorly written, or fluent but glib: it seems a little boring, or out-of-the-way. This is when games may be played, though there are rules. "If strategically assigning a high rank to a proposal ('high-balling') is considered permissible", Lamont has found, "low-balling is not, because it unfairly penalizes better proposals. In fact, low-balling is the only form of strategic voting that panellists describe as illegitimate." This is also the point at which special pleading begins. A panellist will argue that a candidate is handicapped because her Midwestern university is not strong in Chinese history, but that her perspective is original, or socially important, and that in any case too many grants are being given out for Western history, and moreover, her name suggests that she is herself Asian, and her selection will contribute to diversity Discuss, introducing the carefully phrased objection that may let in your own preferred candidate.

An oddity of the process is that decisions are based on little information. It is thought unfair to pay too much attention to track records. (All proposals are born equal.) Letters of recommendation are largely discounted. Candidates are seldom interviewed. Everything, then, comes down to a few hundred words in which a research project is outlined, often with the unacknowledged assistance of a kindly professor. A well-known strategy is to write a proposal for research almost completed, because you know exactly how it is to be done. When funding is received, start work on the next,

still inchoate, project.

The process rewards people who can write good proposals even if they failed to deliver on earlier grants. Few foundations evaluate the research that they fund. In fact, publications turn out to be far less important than one might have imagined. The best credential for a fellowship is a previous fellowship. And landing a grant usually wins you more kudos than getting out the results of your research. "Grants and fellowship are becoming increasingly important as academic signals of excellence", Michèle Lamont remarks, "especially because the proliferation of journals has made the number of publications of academics a less reliable measure of their status." Membership of grant-giving panels itself confers prestige. A satisfactory academic career can be built on getting and giving out grants.

Michèle Lamont interviewed grant officers, committee chairs, and members of several panels, and she was allowed to sit in on some meetings. She makes sensible comments on previous studies of peer review, which in general pay too much attention to the rules of the game and too little to the way in which it is played. Her own study is balanced, informative and largely persuasive. Its findings are less reassuring than she seems to think, but it is evident that her respondents really do care about standards and wish to reward excellence. "It would be sort of self-congratulatory to say that cream rises to the top and that we picked exactly the right set", an economist told Lamont after one panel session. "I don't think that happened. But I think we chose on average the better proposals." It is not easy to imagine a fairer system.



A detail from "Lemon Road" by Oiva Toikka, 1989; from *Pioneers of Contemporary Glass: Highlights from the Barbara and Dennis DuBois collection* by Cindi Strauss (96pp. Yale University Press. £12.99; US \$19.95. 978 0 300 14695 0)