DEBAT
Symposium on Michèle Lamont’s
*How Professors Think.*
*Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (2009)
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.¹ “Secrets of the universe,” as a newspaper acidly put it, “are sim-

* The editors thank Caitlin Daniel for editorial assistance.
pler to explain than Spanish committee decisions.” 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. What can Spain add to this ongoing conversation, especia-

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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 thanks 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
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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, 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.

Bibliographic References

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I read Lamont’s book *How Professors Think* soon after its release in 2009. After seven years in Europe (two in Germany and five in Spain), back from an eighteen-year academic career in the United States, I had often reflected on the contrasts between the academic systems in the United States and Europe, and on the distorted image that the European public has of the former. Lamont’s book provided me with an opportunity to check on my assumptions about the U.S. system and with an authoritative account of this system that I could pass on to my European colleagues. The book is of course much more than this: a brilliant analytical and empirical contribution to the comparative study of evaluative cultures, a topic to which the author has devoted much of her career and intellectual effort (i.e. *Money, Morals, and Manners*, 1992; *The Dignity of Working Men*, 2002). The book is written in a style that satisfies both the public-minded citizen and the dedicated scholar. This is because Lamont has cleverly pushed most of the conversation and intellectual debate with social scientists to footnotes. In fact, reading these footnotes is as enriching and engaging as reading the main text; they walk the reader through some of the most interesting contemporary discussions in the sociology of culture, economic sociology, and the sociology of science.

*How Professors Think* relies on in-depth interviews and Lamont’s own experience to provide an account of how the humanities and the social sciences in the United States conceive of research excellence and how interdisciplinary panels in fellowship competitions reach their decisions. The author shows that decisions result from the combined impact of organizational constraints (e.g. materials subject to consideration, criteria emphasized, time constraints, sequencing of evaluations), the formal and informal criteria of evaluation upon which panelists rely (e.g. originality, significance), and the interactional
dynamics in panels. Lamont systematically examines the role played by all of these factors but privileges the analysis of the interactional dynamics and the diversity of criteria of excellence. Regarding the former, she emphasizes the roles played by panelists’ genuine commitment to reward the best proposals, their relative authority (e.g. reputation, institutions, personality), and their strategic games (e.g. alliances, horse-trading). Regarding the latter she stresses that research proposals shine differently under different lights and due to contrasts across disciplines in conceptions of excellence and the weight assigned to different criteria.

Against the Mertonian tradition, Lamont concludes that academic excellence is not an objective quality waiting to be discovered through honest and systematic application of universalistic evaluative criteria. There are too many legitimate criteria of excellence for that. Against the Bourdieusian tradition, she argues that evaluators are not mere self-interested strategists in an academic field. Evaluators’ self-concept as scholars— their genuine interest in the pursuit of knowledge—is most often than not their overriding concern when ranking research proposals and debating their relative merits with other panelists. One ends the book with the feeling that panelists in the elite competitions that Lamont studied take their task very seriously, find participation in granting committees extremely rewarding from an intellectual point of view, and attach great legitimacy to the way the selection system works. I especially like chapter four, on the pragmatics of project selection in fellowship competitions. In it, Lamont stresses the significance of collegiality, reciprocity, deferral to an expert’s authority and to a discipline’s sovereignty, and cognitive contextualization (using another discipline’s criteria of excellence when evaluating a proposal from that discipline) as key variables in the consensus-attaining process.

Beyond its theoretical value, How Professors Think should be of interest to policy-makers and scholars in Europe, as they struggle to reform the higher education system and make it fit for the twenty-first century. Lamont, a transnational scholar par excellence, knows very well both the European and North-American academic systems, and directly tackles this issue in the last chapter. The remainder of my contribution to this symposium provides an informed but by no means systematic impression of contrasts between the U.S., Spanish, and European systems of evaluation and of prospects for the reproduction of the U.S. evaluative culture in the European Union context.

My experience in the Spanish system rests on having sat in committees set up to promote scholars in the humanities and social sciences, in sociology/political science editorial boards, in sociology/political science research grant committees, in social science book award committees, and in sociology hiring committees. In the last twenty years, the Spanish evaluative culture in the social sciences has begun to change toward the U.S. model, and so have the social sciences in general and their institutional carriers. The potential for conflict in evaluation situations has thus increased considerably and led to a certain bifurcation of evaluative processes, as organizations naturally
or intentionally shape committees to be more or less homogenous in their evaluative criteria.

In Spain the “traditional” evaluative culture did not put research “excellence” at the apex of the hierarchy of factors determining academic rewards. Distributional equality, affirmative action based on social class, seniority, the evaluated scholars’ pecuniary needs, personal loyalties, political affinity, to name just a few relevant factors, often superseded the quality of research as overt legitimate criteria in most evaluative contexts, including the granting of research and related awards. When research excellence entered the picture, the dominant criteria were social and policy significance and, secondarily, broad alignment with particular theoretical paradigms (e.g. Marxism, Post-Modernism, Feminism). Recent changes in the social sciences evaluative culture reflect the gradual penetration of a positivistic epistemological style, first in Economics and Psychology, and next in other fields. This penetration runs parallel to a greater preference for explanation over description and for quantitative over qualitative methods. However, except in Economics and among a small but growing group of social scientists that has taken economic theory as their model, this positivistic turn has not translated into a commensurate emphasis in theoretical originality and relevance and in originality in topic/question. While evaluators increasingly reward the testing of hypothesis and pay close attention to the degree of statistical refinement, much less attention is paid to the broad theoretical and substantive significance of a given piece of research. This reluctance to engage with theory and substance—in the positivistic, not in the affiliation sense—is extensive to other fields of academic evaluation, where standardized indices of quality (e.g. number of peer-reviewed publications, citation counts, publication in JCR journals), instead of careful reading of published material, are extensively relied upon.

I can only speculate about the explanatory factors underlying Spain’s evaluative culture and its recent transformation. Familism, low generalized trust, the dependence of scholarly communities on the state for resources (e.g. research contracts with which they supplement their low salaries), egalitarian ideology, and latent anti-positivism may be relevant to the explanation of Spain’s traditional evaluative culture. Meanwhile, economic development, the internationalization of the economy, and Spain’s insertion in the European space of research and education may in turn explain some of the recent changes in this culture.

My considerable exposure to other European evaluative cultures, especially the German one, has convinced me that Spain is actually not very different from the rest of Europe and that, just like Spain, many European countries are moving closer to the U.S. system but not quite converging. Spain may simply be an extreme case of a European propensity among the social sciences to separate theoretical reflection from empirical research and to treat valid and detailed description and social and policy significance as the main criteria of excellence. Meanwhile, the positivistic turn and the simultaneous trend toward trusting indices of quality more than peer review and inter-subjective processes
of evaluation of a person’s work I observe in Spain can also be observed in other European countries.

In view of these trends one may ask whether a convergence of the U.S. and European cultures of evaluation is in sight. As with most questions related to isomorphic processes connected to globalization, the answer may be “yes, but”. Convergence is already taking place, as I discuss above, but I do not see European academics prioritizing theoretical and substantive depth, relevance, and originality in the evaluation of research proposals as U.S. academics do. It is this interest in theory and substance that in fact underlies the passion, intellectual excitement, collegiality, and reliance on rational argumentation that surrounds the discussions that Lamont so vividly describes. What Lamont may have missed in her account is that this is actually the stuff of academic life in the United States. University professors spend their time with each other, in seminars, departmental meetings, conferences, social gatherings and also late at night on the telephone discussing substance and theory (and gossip too!). In this context, they learn the diplomatic skills that they then display in collective evaluation endeavors. Contrast this with the sharper boundaries that contemporary European academics draw between their work and their private life, a “9 am to 5 pm” bourgeois mindset that strikes me as so prevalent in European academia. The U.S. peculiarity may in fact result from the relative insulation of North American universities from the rest of society—itself a consequence of the high degree of geographical mobility that characterizes the U.S. labor market and the relative financial and administrative autonomy of universities from the state.

Another factor that can help explain the greater role of theory and substance as evaluative criteria in the United States than in Europe is the more structured character of doctoral programs in the former. Although Lamont rightly stresses the potential obstacles to communication among peers in national evaluation contexts that result from the great size and diversity of the U.S. university system, this greater structure facilitates cross-national conversations to a degree rarely found in Europe. In particular, comprehensive exams or papers in one or several fields as part of these programs (aimed at ensuring that future scholars acquire command over a broad literature) contribute to create relatively homogeneous imagined communities of readers. Hence, when participating in evaluative situations, regardless of geographical and institutional location, the members of such imagined communities can interact with each other in a relatively fluent fashion. The combination of highly homogeneous imagined communities of readers with the relatively high insulation from society of U.S. universities also facilitates transdisciplinary flows of information that cannot but facilitate interaction in evaluation contexts and conversations about theory and substance.

Scholarly communication about theory and substance will remain limited and problematic, since it is unlikely that in the near future European universities will insulate themselves from society to the extent they do in the United States, and since the European Space of Higher Education is promoting short
and unstructured doctorate programs and also the institutional separation of the M.A. and PhD. stages. Thus, it will continue to be easier for scholars in the social sciences and humanities to reach consensus and rank research proposals, based on their social and policy significance or their methodological rigor. The field of Economics will probably remain the only exception, due to the great level of theoretical consensus it has achieved.

Given how unlikely it is that national academic evaluative cultures in Europe will converge with that of the United States, prospects for a European Union evaluative culture identical to the one in the United States are even slimmer. Internal and cross-discipline contrasts in epistemological style at the national level get compounded at the European Union level because of the traditional insulation of national academic systems from each other. Deference to authority in European Union level evaluation processes in the social sciences and humanities becomes more difficult when one has no idea about who other panelists are and what processes have led them to become “authorities” in their respective countries. The same happens when it comes to deference to another discipline’s sovereignty, another of the consensus-shaping mechanisms that Lamont describes. How can one defer to a discipline’s sovereignty when disciplines themselves are split into different national cultures and when one is aware of the diversity of approaches to a given discipline across countries? The link between the degree of consensus in a discipline and panelists’ willingness to defer to that discipline’s sovereignty is in fact an issue that Lamont leaves relatively unexamined. While she synthesizes the state of each of the disciplines represented in her book, distinguishing for instance between highly unified fields (i.e. Economics and History) and divided fields (i.e. English and to a lesser extent Political Science) (chapter 3), she does not proceed to examine how these contrasts impact on the authority of different disciplines (chapter 4). I suspect that the more unified a discipline is, the greater its authority. Because of this, the problems of achieving evaluative consensus in national evaluative processes get compounded when one moves to the European Union academic field, even in evaluative panels that focus only on single disciplines.

Recent demands that the recently created European Research Council (ERC) adapts its evaluation procedures to increase the chances of funding for projects from underrepresented countries hints at the potential conflict inherent in such a diverse academic landscape like that of the European Union. Lamont’s book provides useful clues about how to include diversity considerations in European Union level evaluative processes, for sensitiveness to gender and ethnic diversity enters in funding decisions in the United States without necessarily compromising the fairness of the system, as the author strongly emphasizes. I am optimistic in this respect. I am less optimistic, however, about the extent to which great intellectual diversity in the European Union may not strengthen the tendency already observable at national levels toward sacrificing theoretical and substantive relevance and originality in order to reach consensus in European Union competitions. I also fear that clarity and elegance (other
criteria of excellence emphasized in the United States) may become victims of diversity in European Union research contests. This is because most applicants are not native speakers of English, the official language, which puts pressure on evaluative committees to be lenient on style when ranking competing research projects. In the end, methods and social and policy relevance seem to be bound to reign more sovereign in these competitions than at the national level. This would be a pity and a reason to keep on searching for inspiration in the U.S. academic culture that Lamont so nicely examines.
Michèle Lamont’s research on the academic evaluation system is a brilliant and much-needed contribution because it brings to light peer review procedures, challenging some assumptions about how scholars define and recognize excellence. She invites those of us involved in peer review and evaluation to be more reflexive about how we accomplish such a task, since it is the “holy grail” of academic life. Peer review represents the main procedure for allocating resources and positions. Yet in spite of its centrality, it is surrounded by opacity and secrecy most of the time; it is one of many academic tasks that are never taught, and we have to learn from our own experience. Since January 2011, I have been a member of the social sciences coordination team of the Agencia Nacional de Evaluación y Prospectiva (hereafter, ANEP), a public institution belonging to the State Secretary for Research, Development and Innovation, which is in charge of evaluating the main public research funding programs. Hence, as an ANEP member, I welcome the opportunity to participate in this symposium and to share some thoughts on this topic by drawing on my firsthand experience in academic evaluation, especially in the procedures for reaching agreement and defining the excellence of applicants and their proposals.

My ANEP colleagues in the social sciences team and I share similar criteria for judging the quality of research proposals as those studied by Lamont: originality, feasibility, social and scientific interests. Similarly, there is no a priori consensus about what is original, innovative, or interesting. This, too,

1. I would like to clarify that my current experience in this particular team is not necessarily similar to that of previous teams or current ANEP teams in other disciplines. Thus, my contribution exemplifies current evaluation processes in Spain but cannot be taken as a model of Spanish evaluative cultures.
depends largely on evaluators’ experiences and expertise. Therefore, my experience coincides with Lamont’s account: reaching agreement and fair decisions after reading proposals and reviews resides in the deliberation process (where non-cognitive features, such as emotion work, play a key role) and in the ability to practice cognitive contextualization, namely, judging proposals in their own terms by using the epistemological (theoretical and methodological) styles that are most appropriate to the proposal. In the social sciences (and probably this applies to other disciplines as well), there are no standard criteria about how to define “what’s interesting” (because there is no general and preliminary agreement about what topics are more interesting or socially relevant than others) or about how to balance originality and feasibility. These criteria emerge during the discussion. Applicants have to present and justify the interest, originality, and feasibility of their proposals, while reviewers have to judge whether the proposals are right by relying on their knowledge about the field, as well as by examining the applicants’ research experience in order to evaluate their ability to complete the proposed project.

Though cognitive contextualization is a necessary condition for fair evaluation, it is still very common to find reviews—either in academic journals or in grants programs—where it is absent. By this, I am referring to reviewers who judge proposals according to their own epistemological style, as if they had in mind the proposal they would like to have written or wanted to read, instead of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal in question according to its particular content and style. On this point, I agree with Lamont. The deliberation process helps to put in practice such a cognitive contextualization (as opposed to just writing a review on our own or scoring proposals individually) when deploying and justifying our judgment in front of other scholars and reaching an agreement.

In the ANEP programs I collaborate with, we tend to evaluate proposals and supervise reviewers’ evaluations mostly within our own disciplines (sociology in my case). However, even in a single discipline, there is ample diversity of theories, methods, topics and interests; this requires using cognitive contextualization. Besides, in programs such as Ramón y Cajal and Juan de la Cierva², panelists must evaluate proposals out of their personal expertise as well, and at the end of the process, they have to produce a single list ranking all candidates from all disciplines included in the social sciences ANEP area.³ The quality of the interactions during the meetings is crucial to reaching a fair outcome. Prior to the panel meeting, each of us evaluates a certain number of candidates; two panelists evaluate each candidate. We discuss via email the similarities and divergences in our reviews. But it is during the panel meeting when our notes

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2. The Ramón y Cajal program seeks to hire talented researchers by offering them five-year contracts and the possibility, at least until now, of a tenure-track position in the Spanish higher education system. The Juan de la Cierva program is a three-year postdoctoral position.

3. The disciplines are anthropology, sociology, political science, geography, journalism and communication, and library and information sciences.
are put together; where the reviewers whose scoring of the same proposal is
divergent can clarify their views; and where our practices of evaluating and
scoring are brought together and adjusted according to the pragmatic fairness
of deliberations described by Lamont in chapter 4. Thus, panelists’ personal
and collective interactive qualities are decisive for the success and fairness of
the process (as well as the variety of approaches and areas covered by their
expertise). This is one of the conditions and, at the same time, difficulties
of a successful panel: to gather a maximum of diversity (regarding gender,
approaches, epistemological styles, and geographical area of institutions) and
to put in practice a robust cognitive contextualization, by bracketing their own
interests and preferences, which is vital in order to recognize plural ways of
identifying excellence and to carry out the debates and interactions enabling
a fair evaluative outcome.

Although, as mentioned earlier, there are no a priori general criteria of
evaluation of applicants’ trajectory and of the quality of their teams’ research,
we must apply some standards established by public evaluation agencies. These
criteria include the impact index of journals (hereafter, JCR), the quality of
the book press where they have published, the competitive funding research
programs they have joined (the most prestigious being the Plan Estatal de
Investigación, at the national level, and The European Union Framework Pro-
gram for Research and Innovation, at the European level) and the prestige of
international universities and research centers where applicants have studied
and worked. Since 2011, these shared standards are highlighted, as well, by
the inclusion of scholars from European, specially British, and U.S. universities
in the ANEP social science panels. Probably, the emphasis on internationa-
lization (understood as publications in English in well-ranked journals and
with important book publishers, funding from competitive research programs,
such as those of the EU, research stays in prestigious universities abroad and
participation in international scientific networks) is making our criteria closer
to those described by Lamont.

Thus, beside the traditional hierarchical order of academia, a global hierar-
chy regarding institutions, journals and publishers emerges. In Spain, whereas
older scholars at the top of academic hierarchies (at least in the fields I am more
familiar with) did not need to be well-positioned in these global hierarchies
and networks to be recognized as excellent, now those starting their academic
careers have to prove their “internationalization,” for instance, through a strong
publishing record measured by the number of articles in JCR journals. This
creates a paradoxical situation, for the CVs of most of evaluators do not include
the kind of publications and international research experience expected from

4. In the case of proposals for the Plan Estatal de Investigación (State Plan of Research),
projects are carried out by research teams and not by individual researchers.
5. In order to be taken into account as a merit, the period spent in a foreign academic center as
a visiting scholar must be of at least six months. The merit, of course, is higher if applicants
have obtained their doctorate or worked as research fellows in such centers.
applicants whose excellence they have to evaluate. This does not necessarily mean that they will be unable to assess applicants and proposals with a higher level of internationalization and a better publishing record. It also does not entail that evaluators will not be able to practice cognitive contextualization in order to define excellence, as evaluators with strong international trajectory would do. Yet, it breaks with the implicit hierarchy between evaluators and applicants as described by a political scientist quoted by Lamont: “I felt like we were sitting on the top of a pyramid….and were sorting between kind of B, B+, and A scholars, and we all thought we were As” (p. 1). My personal view is that losing this feeling of superiority towards applicants and proposals could produce a better affective situation for carrying out the review and putting cognitive contextualization into practice. Of course, it can elicit mixed feelings when we play the role of academic gatekeepers. But the acknowledgement of this paradox is not generalized and depends largely on how self-reflexive evaluators are. This is why many of them can still share the view of the political scientist quoted above regardless of their academic record.

When comparing the work of the panels described by Lamont with my experience at the ANEP, one of the main differences resides in how the institutional framework of funding programs and institutions contributes to producing and defining what excellence is. While the cases Lamont analyzes are fellowship and research grant programs funded by independent and private non-profit organizations, in Spain the main funding institutions are public, state agencies. In the current situation, due to drastic cuts in public spending and subsequent delays in issuing calls for proposals, the communication of results, transfers of funds, and modification of applications and reviewing of forms are also affecting the evaluation process profoundly. For instance, two weeks after finishing our evaluation for the Ramón y Cajal and Juan de la Cierva programs, the head of the social sciences commission informed us, in total dismay, that unlike previous years (when there was a list of candidates for each scientific area according to the different panels), this year the official guidelines asked us for a single general list, including all candidates from all scientific areas and stating who was eligible and who was in waiting positions. Such a list was not produced under a general evaluation framework, which would have been impossible since we do not share the same standards and epistemological styles across the so-called hard sciences, social sciences and the humanities. The reason for this decision made little sense to panellists and ANEP scientific teams, as well as the ANEP officials I work with, who had to produce as best as they could a single list from the ones provided by the different commissions. Funding cuts reduce the number of successful candidates, forcing us to remove excellent candidates from the eligible positions. Furthermore, hard-to-understand public decisions remind us that the peer review process is also shaped by political and institutional decisions totally out of scholars’ reach. Unfortunately, in Spain in recent years, many of these decisions reveal a deep lack of responsibility and great ignorance about how scientific research works.
Another example of organizational decisions that shape the process of identifying excellence is the design of the evaluation form filled by reviewers and panelists. These forms have different sections and scoring ranges. The Ramon y Cajal and Juan de la Cierva application forms changed in the last call. Whereas in 2011 there was one section for evaluating applicants’ merits (publications, research experience, etc.) and another one for evaluating their research proposal, the latter has now been suppressed—applicants were not asked to describe the research project they would develop if they obtained the research contract. As a result of this change, excellence measured according to applicants’ trajectory has taken over excellence as defined by their research project. (Cuts in research funding seem to be producing similar outcomes in other countries as well, in Canada (Gordon and Poulin 2013) and the United Kingdom (Rohn 2013).) This tendency can aggravate one of the pitfalls of the current peer review and academic evaluation process: the many versions of the “Matthew effect” or accumulated advantage, as Lamont describes it. Consequently, the reduction of the success rate due to research budget cuts risks giving more to those who have more now and have received more in the past.

Another shift in the application form this year (in line with changes due to funding cuts) concerns the division dedicated to assess applicants’ merits in several sections: one for publications and participation in funded research projects and another just for their international experience in research projects and attainment of funding. Thus, applicants with an excellent publication record, but without much experience in international research projects or in obtaining funding from foreign agencies, cannot receive points from this section towards their final score, what clearly undermines their chances of being chosen. Applicants whose research does not require a large budget or who typically work on their own would also struggle to be recognized as excellent researchers according to this new type of evaluation form. As public investment in research funding decreases, the ability to obtain funding from other institutions is given more value in academic evaluation, and thus is transforming the understanding of what an excellent scholar is. If reviewers do not agree with such an understanding, they cannot override these new rules, since they have to follow the formal requirements of the evaluation process set by the funding institution.

The traditional scarcity of academic resources is increasing these days not only due to financial cuts, but also as a result of the globalization of some standards used to measure (or I should say “produce”) excellence, such as the JCR impact factor, which leads everyone who wants to see their work recognized and to build a good publishing record to submit it to the same journals and presses. As success rates inevitably decrease, competition becomes tougher, and the time invested in being funded and published increases to the detriment of the time that scholars spend researching and disseminating research findings. This situation raises the issue of whether it is worth keeping this expensive evaluation process (measured in terms of money and time) when research funding is dwindling and when political decisions about research funding programs
are erratic (Herbert et al. 2013). Some researchers are suggesting other ways of allocating research resources in a less costly and centralized fashion, such as giving a baseline grant to every qualified researcher working in academia who requests it (Gordon and Poulin 2013). This, in return, would be more inviting to those put off by time costs and reduced chances of success, and more democratic, with less paperwork before the allocation of funding and more accountability after the completion of research (Ibid.).

The diminishing success rate in obtaining research funding (due to financial cuts as well as the decreasing rate of papers published in top journals compared to the growing amount of papers submitted) is not related to a decrease of excellence within the academic community, since many excellent proposals and applicants are left without funding just because there is not enough money, and the publication of excellent papers is delayed and/or relegated to less well-ranked publications because top journals can only publish a limited number of them every year—not to mention other disadvantages, such as English not being most researchers’ mother tongue, working on a geographical area less interesting for Anglo-Saxon journals or using non-English bibliographical references. If scholars’ excellence is measured by their funded research and publication record, the increasing scarcity of academic resources can result in the production of scarce excellence. This risk is highlighted by the trend in emphasizing the excellence of trajectories instead of the excellence in research proposals and contributions.

Lamont cites some scholars who state that academia is a meritocracy, “intrinsically an elitist enterprise” and not a democracy (p. 217), an institution in which the rule of peer review and evaluation selects and promotes excellence and not the equal allocation of resources. However, as she clearly explains throughout How Professors Think, without establishing and sustaining democratic rules of deliberation, academic judgment is less likely to produce meritocracy than oligarchy and homophily. This is one of the reasons why it is important to have diversity in peer review panels. Diversity of topics, institutions, or gender is not a standard asked for in the evaluation requirements of the ANEP, and it is not something we tend to use in general as a criterion when producing lists of eligible proposals and candidates. We face the same situation described by Lamont, namely that merit and diversity do not respond to similar standards and that, in peer review procedures, merit prevails. But as Lamont finds, the numerous scholars accomplishing this task are not indifferent to diversity and think that a fair evaluation should produce a list of diverse eligible candidates or proposals. After completing our work and producing a list of successful candidates, it is not uncommon that we check how plural the list is; at least in our case of the current social sciences commission (I am not sure that it should be the case for everyone in our academic community), our satisfaction with the result runs parallel to the number of women, different disciplines, viewpoints, and institutions we have selected.

To conclude, I would like to quote my colleague at the Complutense University, Elena Casado, who says, half-joking, that academia very often seems to
represent the worst of tradition, modernity, and postmodernity: the “feudal” hierarchies; the modernist nemesis of bureaucratic rationalization and the belief in a world split between experts and laypeople; and the postmodern tenet of “anything goes” and “do as you please,” at least for those well-placed in the “old boys club.” As a form of allocating scarce resources within academia, peer review serves as a gatekeeping mechanism for this particular institutionalized community, contributing therefore to these worst-of-three-worlds dynamic. But peer review can also prevent this dynamic. Since excellence is far from being universally self-evident, and identifying it is part of a deliberative process drawing on the ability to practice cognitive contextualization, then opening the black box of peer review as well as introducing democratic principles (such as transparency and diversity) are essential practices to guarantee research quality and innovation, that is, to produce a real meritocracy and not an empty and dusty set of practices serving a homogeneous oligarchy.

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Michèle Lamont’s *How Professors Think* is a compelling, nuanced, and richly observed empirical study of the inner workings of academic peer review panels—the forums convened by major funding agencies to assess research grant and fellowship proposals. Based on more than eighty recorded interviews with panelists from five organizations and extensive firsthand observations of three interdisciplinary panels, the book offers major insights into the “evaluative cultures” of academic disciplines in the United States and, more broadly, the construction of scholarly excellence. As academic gatekeepers, Lamont argues, the members of peer review panels collectively play a pivotal role in the distribution of material and symbolic rewards within the U.S. university system.

At a different level, *How Professors Think* can be read as an entry into the ongoing project of developing a sociological theory of action, especially one that takes into account the complex relationship between its two main generative aspects: practical sense and theoretical reason. Although Lamont often refers to principles of scholarly evaluation as criteria (a term that suggests relatively codified decision-making standards), she also pays close attention to the ephemeral, “emotional,” and fuzzy elements of scholarly judgment. Indeed, it is striking how many of the “evanescent” decision-making factors Lamont and her respondents refer to make use of the term sense (among others, “shared sense,” “common sense,” and “sense of self”). This focus on the practical sense of peer reviewers allows Lamont to avoid representing scholarly excellence either as an immutable or transcendental “essence,” entirely objective or impervious to socio-historical forces. Yet neither does Lamont depict academic evaluation as a simple product of academic status struggles. Instead, *How Professors Think* develops a sophisticated theory of scholarly judgment as a mode of collective problem-solving that obeys a set of rules specific to the academic sphere. At various points, the book also offers useful insights into the contrasting styles and “epistemic cultures” of six academic disciplines.
In reacting to a study as rich and thoughtful as this book, I find it necessary to focus my comments on a central question: What can *How Professors Think* teach us about the cognitive autonomy of U.S. scholars, that is to say, about their collective ability to “insulate [themselves] from external forces,” especially those originating in the political and economic fields, and “uphold [their] own criteria of evaluation over and against those of neighboring or intruding fields”? (Wacquant 2007: 269) If this concern narrows the terms of the discussion on the one hand, then on the other hand it widens them considerably. After all, to address the question will require lifting Lamont’s empirical observations out of the specific institutional context in which they were made and considering academic peer review panels in comparative perspective. In keeping with the request of the symposium editors, I will orient my comments to the “similarities and differences between the panels of experts” in Lamont’s study and the world of public policy “think tanks”—the loosely bounded network of organizations that have become fixtures of U.S. politics since the 1970s, even as they have proliferated around the world, including within Spanish politics (see, for example, Freres et al. 2000; McGann 2012; Medvetz 2012).

What is the effect of resituating Lamont’s argument within the wider social ecology of knowledge production in the United States? My answer has two parts. First, I will argue that this approach allows for a new appreciation of *How Professors Think* that has gone largely unremarked, even within the considerable body of writing that has already emerged in response to it (see the editors’ introduction). In particular, the book contains valuable resources for sociologists who wish to grasp the notion of cognitive autonomy and apply it to the empirical study of intellectuals. Second, I will argue that the book’s chief limitation lies in its relatively narrow empirical focus, which gives rise to a stance that—while remaining free of epistemological relativism—leads to an analytic relativism that insists on giving equal pride of place to both the limits and reach of cognitive autonomy. By placing the academic peer review panels of Lamont’s study within the wider social ecology of knowledge production, we can sketch the broad contours of a more comprehensive view that highlights the relative autonomy of academic peer reviewers and the relative heteronomy of policy experts, currently their chief rivals in the struggle over policy relevant knowledge.

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How does the practice of academic peer review as Lamont describes it compare to *policy research*—the term I will use to refer to the practical routines and repertoires that prevail in the nebulous world of think tanks? The first clear difference is that among think tanks, peer review itself is almost entirely absent. Most policy experts freely publish “policy briefs,” reports, blog postings, and other written products without submitting them to a peer review system. Furthermore, numerous key products of policy research are not written materials at all, but rather speeches, briefings, panel discussions, congressional testimony,
and television and radio punditry. However, rather than drawing any hasty conclusions from this difference, let us consider the most notable similarities between the practical logics of peer review and policy research.

In the first place, it should come as no surprise that in neither setting can judgments of excellence be plausibly described as the result of a purely mental or cognitive process. Furthermore, both modes of judgment are inevitably shaped by forces external to the institutional setting itself, including considerations of the most banal and prosaic sorts. Lamont cites several factors that fall outside of official, codified definitions of scholarly merit but condition the peer review process, including reviewers’ perceptions of applicants’ personal virtues and the time limits built into the evaluation process. Moreover, the same panelists sometimes make decisions in Potter Stewart-esque fashion, by using criteria that never rise to the level of consciousness. Likewise, as I will elaborate below, policy researchers inevitably bring factors originating outside of the world of think tanks to bear on the process of judging policy research. For the moment, however, the notable point is that in neither setting can excellence be represented in terms of a pure “essence” or as a self-evident feature of the intellectual product.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty and fuzziness that sometimes characterize the act of judging excellence in both settings (especially where encounters among structurally distant actors are involved), there is a discernible social order to each setting. Moreover, in both cases, this order emerges largely out of social and interactional dynamics particular to the institutional setting in question. This is another way of saying that each domain has developed a kind of autonomy. Lamont, for example, describes the specific “rules” of reviewer deliberation, themselves based largely on shared principles of scholarly judgment. Similarly, policy experts obey certain rules specific to think tanks. However, in the next section I will argue that this apparent similarity gives way to a major difference inasmuch as the form of “autonomy” found among think tanks is deeply fraught with paradox and better described as a kind of “hyper-dependence.”

Before moving on, a final point of similarity between peer review panels and think tanks is worth noting: the subtle layering of conflict and consensus within each institutional setting. As Lamont shows, peer review panels are pregnant with the potential for disagreement, especially those based on “epis-

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1. For readers not familiar with this reference: Potter Stewart (1915-1985) was a U.S. Supreme Court Justice who famously acknowledged, in the context of a 1964 obscenity case, that the concept hard-core pornography defied easy definition, but downplayed the problem by writing that, “I know it when I see it.” Stewart’s quote is often held up as an exemplar of tautological inference.

2. I use these separate terms, social and interactional, to highlight a distinction between peer review panels and think tanks. In short, whereas the dynamic of peer review is anchored largely in direct interaction, among think tanks, more distant forms of social influence that cannot properly be labeled interactional (including imitation, self-differentiation, and other forms of mutual orientation) supply the chief relational logic.
temic cultural” differences among disciplines. In the setting of think tanks, conflict and consensus also go hand in hand—political ideology being the most publicly salient axis of conflict, even if organizational competition, including between ideological allies, often eclipses ideology in its importance. Nevertheless, in each setting, an analytic “scale shift” underscores a layer of consensus rooted in the fact that the actors are engaged in a common project. On academic peer review panels, for example, disciplinary pride may induce an economist to take a dim view of a grant application endorsed by a political scientist. Yet if the disagreement rises to the level of open conflict, it is likely to reaffirm certain commonalities in the panelists’ criteria of scholarly judgment. In the same way, think tanks compete with one another for money, attention from politicians, and media coverage, even as they collaborate on projects, cultivate extensive network ties, and insist almost unanimously that their work is more “useful” and “tied to the real world” than that of their academic counterparts. In fact, academic scholars constitute the main reference group against which policy experts recognize their affinities.

This last point has major implications for the discussion. What it suggests, above all, is the futility of comparing peer review panelists and policy experts on purely analytic grounds, or as if the two sets of actors exist in isolation from each other. To adopt this approach would be to reduce the relations among them to relations of similarity and difference when in fact academic peer reviewers and policy experts inhabit the same social space and engage in relations of struggle, hierarchy, and mutual influence. The final section of my contribution will briefly consider the significance of this point and arrive at a general conclusion about How Professors Think.

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Should we take the preceding discussion to mean that similarities between academic peer review and policy research outweigh differences? The question, I would submit, is neither trivial nor arcane, yet its answerability turns on whether or not it is possible to defend the utility and coherence of the concept cognitive autonomy. Difficult to grasp, much less to apply empirically, the “problem of autonomy” is one that has hampered the sociology of knowledge and intellectuals since its birth. Moreover, the problem seems neither to have lessened over time nor in relation to the boldness of those who dismiss it. (One thinks of Julien Benda’s *La Trahison des Clercs*, Edward Said’s injunction to “Speak truth to power,” and Chomsky’s castigation of the “new mandarins”—all of which defined the intellectual’s proper mission partly in terms of cognitive autonomy and charged a segment of the intelligentsia with a betrayal and yet none of which actually resolved anything in the social scientific study of intellectuals.)

3. I use the word analytic in the sense derived from linguistics, which refers to a morphological category consisting of languages characterized by isolated as opposed to synthetic grammatical elements.
Faced with the absence of any pure, unvarnished, or absolute concept of cognitive autonomy, one confronts a seemingly stark epistemological choice. One path—plainly the more extreme—is to renounce the concept of autonomy altogether. This is not Lamont’s position, nor is it mine, but one of its effects is worth noting here. Without even reverting to a philosophical argument against epistemological relativism, I would simply note the practical “finality” of any such stance. Just as the last move in a chess match means that the game is over—even for the winner—a tenable defense of epistemological relativism leaves only one non-disingenuous move for the defender: namely, walk away and remain silent. I would also note, in defending the need for an analytic conception of cognitive autonomy, the idea’s resonance in everyday speech, which is greater than commonly acknowledged. To say that a given statement is biased, partisan, or self-interested, for example, is tantamount to saying that its truth-value is wanting because the thinking underpinning it has met with some sort of encumbrance along the way. The encumbrance may be the result of direct coercion or it may be linked more distantly to habit, self-interest, adherence to an ideological program, loyalty to a national or religious culture, or some combination of these. It does not matter: the point is that the everyday coherence and self-resonance of truth-claims generally rest on an implied background notion akin to cognitive autonomy.

What this discussion suggests to me is the need to fortify a conception of cognitive autonomy rooted in intellectual practices and relations. Among sociologists, the best approach has been offered by sociologists who insist on rescuing the idea of cognitive autonomy from its “theoreticist” confinement by assigning it these features:

(i) Social. On this view, cognitive autonomy is a property that obtains at the level of the group and depends on a notion akin to epistemic culture. Just as it is nonsensical to speak of a private language or culture, in other words, we can posit the impossibility of a private or individual autonomy;

(ii) Generative. As opposed to mere freedom from constraint, cognitive autonomy must be understood in terms of positive commitment or duty with respect to an epistemic culture. In this sense, the Kantian notion of freedom as obedience to a self-imposed rule supplies a useful analogy;

(iii) Conditional. To reiterate a point made earlier, there is no such thing as cognitive autonomy in any pure or absolute sense; any claim about a group’s autonomy therefore implies some kind of comparison or contextual description.

4. It is difficult to raise this point without also mentioning Lamont’s (1987) classic piece about Jacques Derrida’s intellectual career. He did not walk away or remain silent, but the latter stage of his career seems to reaffirm my central point, albeit in a different sense. As many scholars have argued, Derrida was compelled to invent ever more elaborate ways of saying, in effect, that there was no stable truth to express.
Among social theorists who might be identified with the view of cognitive autonomy I am suggesting here, Bourdieu is likely the most prominent contemporary thinker; however, the idea’s long pedigree extends at least to Weber’s claims about the disaggregation of modern societies into autonomous and incompatible value spheres.

Drawing on a notion of cognitive autonomy as a social, generative, and conditional property, I would argue that the differences between think tanks and academic peer review panels vastly outweigh the similarities. As noted above, few think tank-affiliated policy experts must subject themselves to the judgments of peers who enforce positive standards of intellectual rigor. Furthermore, insofar as think tanks collectively acquire a form of autonomy, it is a peculiar one built on an elaborate balancing act or game of separation and attachment *vis-à-vis* other, more established fields—especially those of academic, political, economic, and media production. Insofar as think tanks align themselves with the world of scholarly production, they tend to do so in a temporary and superficial manner, in order to capture a dose of academic authority without accruing any of the dishonors associated with the image of the “ivory tower.” Too much scholasticism impedes their pursuit of political relevance, funding, and publicity. Although in their public self-descriptions policy experts often emphasize the idea of scholarly rigor (or, in the words of one think tank, a single-minded “commitment to…reason and facts”), the most significant rewards generally flow to those who can skillfully balance the contradictory styles of the policy aide, the lobbyist, the public relations guru, the political consultant, the entrepreneur, and, to some degree, the academic scholar (Medvetz 2010). This means that the following qualities can all significantly enhance a policy expert’s reputation: a knack for making memorable quips, sound bites, and slogans; willingness to engage in the rapid-fire production of policy briefs and memos (often in reaction to still-developing news stories); the ability to predict which policy issues will become “hot” in the near future; being “good on television”; and, perhaps most important, establishing rapport with donors.5

Elsewhere I have argued that “the search for the totally unencumbered intellectual is a futile one, since all intellectuals—from the college professor who must ‘publish or perish’ to the technocrat who cannot challenge the basic premises of her research assignment—face certain necessities and constraints in their work” (Medvetz 2012: 153). The inverse point is equally significant: “the language of pure determination is troublesome as well, since even if inte-

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5. In an interview, Norm Ornstein, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute whom *The Washington Monthly* once dubbed the “king of quotes” for his prodigiosity in supplying sound bites to American journalists, told me with notable pride that editors at the *Los Angeles Times*—having reached the conclusion that their newspaper had grown too dependent on Ornstein quotes—issued an *explicit moratorium* on statements from the policy expert. It seems likely that Ornstein could experience this episode as a “victory,” even though its result was an enforced (albeit circumscribed) form of invisibility, precisely because it exposed a weakness in the journalistic field itself.
ntellectuals are always constrained in some way, they are inevitably motivated 
broadcast by certain positive ambitions, drives, and desires.” (Ibid.). Put differently, 
opening the black box of cognitive autonomy requires describing these posi-
tive ambitions, drives, and desires in practical and social terms, which rest on 
the presence of communities of relatively like-minded thinkers who tacitly or 
explicitly possess what Lamont calls “shared definitions of quality”. This is 
precisely what I believe How Professors Think does so well.

My only quarrel with the book lies in its occasional tendency to revert to 
a purely philosophical notion of cognitive autonomy through the reflex of 
giving equal weight to autonomy’s limits and reach. Widening the analytic lens 
slightly beyond the world of academic peer review leads to a different empha-
isis. After all, when situated in the broader intellectual field, the peer review 
panels Lamont studies become notable for their relatively high self-governing 
capacities and their stable ties to disciplinary and professional organizations, 
departmental units, and academic journals. To be sure, How Professors Think 
also considers the threats to autonomy experienced by two academic disciplines 
in which the “problem of the boundary” is posed somewhat acutely: namely, 
anthropology and English literary studies. However, I would submit that such 
threats are the norm rather than the exception—and that a proper sociology of 
knowledge and intellectuals must proceed from the Nietzschean maxim that 
those “who leave every glass standing only half-emptied refuse to admit that 
everything in the world has its sediments and dregs.” Put differently, opening 
the black box of autonomy inevitably reveals “sediments and dregs.” Thus, to 
emphasize the absence of pure cognitive freedom in the name of “moderation” 
is to risk honoring the sort of mediocrity to which the same writer referred 
in the following terms: “Virtue for them is what maketh modest and tame… 
That, however—is mediocrity though it be called moderation.”

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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.¹

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). 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,
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.
Revisiting *How Professors Think* across National and Occupational Contexts

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Revisiting *How Professors Think* through the lens of the evaluative cultures of Spanish peer reviewers and those of American policy experts raises diverse unanticipated challenges. Below I first discuss the three contributions that consider *How Professors Think* via cross-national comparisons (Díez Medrano, Lasén, and Valiente) before turning to the discussion of cognitive autonomy at the center of Medvetz’s comments, which are inspired by his own particularly illuminating study of American think tanks (Medvetz 2012).

Before proceeding, I wish to thank our four colleagues for making time to seriously think about some of the implications of *How Professors Think* that I had not previously considered. I am greatly appreciative of their thoughtful contributions, as I am of Alvaro Santana-Acuña and Xavier Coller for suggesting this symposium and for so skillfully orchestrating it. They have created a much valued opportunity for me to reflect on *How Professors Think* four years after the publication of the book in English, and after that, it has made its way into various international audiences via translations in Korean, Chinese, and soon Spanish.

*How Professors Think* concluded on whether it is desirable and possible for peer review “a la americana” to diffuse beyond U.S. borders. In the last chapter I described some of the conditions that make this type of evaluative practice possible in the United States (focusing on factors such as the significant demographic weight of the U.S. research community, the spatial distance and decentralization of its institutions of higher education, and the lengthy graduate education process that brings students in close contact with mentors who impact their self-concept while diffusing implicit evaluation standards).

This chapter also suggested why it would not be reasonable to expect that the same customary rules of evaluation I described to appear in countries where different conditions for scientific work prevail. This has been confirmed in
my collaborative writings of evaluative cultures in Canada (SSHRC 2008), China (Lamont and Sun 2012), Finland (Lamont and Huutoniemi 2011) and France (Cousin and Lamont 2009). For instance, the NORFACE peer review system adopted in Finland and widely used in Europe (Lamont and Huutoniemi 2011) favors bringing in international reviewers to counter the localism that often prevails in small size academic communities. This system demonstrates the importance of adapting peer review processes to the features of national research communities.

The comments on *How Professors Think* provided by Lasén, Valiente, and Díez Medrano go very much in the same direction and add considerable nuance and complexity to the problem by considering the Spanish case in light of these authors’ own experience as evaluators. Many of the points they raise concern the extent to which the Spanish system of evaluation can converge with U.S. *qua* international norms.

Lasén notes how the growing participation of non-Spanish evaluators (especially U.S. and British) in the Agencia Nacional de Evaluación y Prospectiva (ANEP) is affecting the practices of Spanish panels in such a way that they come to converge with the practices adopted by the U.S. panels I studied. She notes that national academic status order is now challenged by a number of international status markers (e.g., publications in top-rated international journals), which senior scholars serving as evaluators often might not have since, when they started their careers, they were not expected to internationalize their work to the same extent as scholars applying for funding are now expected to do. This professional asymmetry creates paradoxes and tensions that Díez Medrano also notes. This is the first of several challenges the Spanish peer review system faces.

A second significant challenge is the mismanagement of peer review by public administrators in charge of overseeing the system. Lasén mentions a recent case where panelists were asked to rank applicants across all disciplines, an impossible task from the perspective of the academic expertise required. France has faced comparable episodes, explained in part by a tradition of state centralization that is fundamentally at odds with the respect of academic autonomy and the integrity of the peer review system. Administrative interference tarnishes the legitimacy of research evaluation all together, and discourages researchers from getting involved in funded research (either as applicants or as peer reviewers). Thus, we learn that challenges to peer review come not only from insufficiently professionalized localistic and clientelistic academics, but also from hungry public administrators who overextend the tentacles of governmental power. An obvious conclusion is that those in charge of scientific and research policies need to show the way if they are seriously committed to fostering more universalistic academic communities.

A third challenge has to do with criteria of evaluation used in prestigious Spanish competitions. Lasén mentions that one such competition puts more weight on the trajectory of candidates than on their project, which is at odds with international standards. In a recent evaluation of Canadian social science
and humanities peer review I was involved in (SSHRC 2008), the international blue-ribbon panel in charge of the evaluation recommended that less weight be given to the past record of candidates as compared to their research proposal, so as to even the playing field for more junior researchers. I presume change is most likely to come from younger generations of Spanish researchers, due to their growing involvement in European and international research communities. For this reason, reducing the impact of past records in scoring proposals should foster major changes in the Spanish academic community.

A fourth challenge concerns the dysfunctional consequences of academics competing for a diminishing pool of grant resources and space in prestigious journals, which generates a considerable waste in time and energy. This raises the question of the desirability of adopting more variegated forms and sites of evaluation (e.g., through the creation of electronic journals, as in Italian sociology—see the editors’ notes in the introduction) which would encourage the development of a wider range of complementary types of excellence. This approach is to be contrasted with a form of mono-cropping that pushes young academics to submit themselves to a narrow range of standards. Added to the requirement of writing in a language other than their native tongue, and that of adopting set formats for articles (as described by Abend 2006), such mono-cropping is unlikely to work to the advantage of Spanish academics. The alternative is to let a hundred thousand flowers bloom, with the risk that lower quality work emerges and that the better researchers be drowned in a climate of “anything goes.”

In her contribution, Valiente points out additional challenges, such as that of finding highly qualified and disinterested reviewers given the size of the Spanish research community. She also mentions differences in the culture of evaluators (concerning for instance the respect of norms of confidentiality, which it should be noted is far from perfect in the U.S. academia as well), and the fact that Spanish academics are less likely to think of themselves as active members of a scientific community that requires to take turns in serving as reviewers. Most importantly, she suggests that, whereas the existence of informal customary rules of evaluation may “work” in the United States, it could well have pernicious effect in Spain by feeding clientelism. For instance, respect for the rule of “cognitive contextualization” may get in the way of denouncing instances of corruption when evaluators openly seek to favor researchers they are close to. She also stresses that in a context where there are few high quality proposals, meeting basic standards such as clarity, feasibility, and methodological soundness should be given more weight and importance than criteria such as originality. She concludes by stressing the significance of establishing and consolidating peer review nationally. I would venture that the British Economic and Social Research Council’s approach of selecting, training and rewarding members of a college of assessors could be a useful way forward for raising standards for peer review in Spain.

As for Díez Medrano, I appreciated his comparison of How Professors Think not only to the Spanish evaluative culture, but also to the European Union’s
evaluation commissions where he has gained considerable experience. He notes a growing bifurcation within the Spanish system, between those who are embracing international norms and other researchers. The former, he argues, put more emphasis on criteria of evaluation such as social and policy significance and methodological rigor, as opposed to theoretical and substantive contribution. These criteria contrast with those preferred by more traditional researchers who have mostly put weight on alignment with particular theoretical paradigms (Marxism, feminism, etc.). Such differences in criteria of evaluation are a considerable source of conflict. The outcome is a separation between theoretical reflection and empirical research, which is at odds with U.S., but not European, trends. One is left wondering whether there is anything shared among the contributions that are judged significant across these various contexts (between, let’s say, Ulrich Beck and Axel Honneth (as representatives of European social theory) on the one hand, and Michael Hout and Alejandro Portes, to take two random examples of U.S. middle range sociology).

Díez Medrano provides a most convincing description of the factors that may explain the current state of peer review in Spain (characterized by the low autonomy of the academic field), which ties current practices to the broader features of national and academic contexts. His analysis should inspire further collective reflections among Spanish academics on the future of peer review in their country and on how to reform the system while avoiding the perils of the over-quantification of excellence measurement. This kind of measurement is often perceived and denounced as a tool of neo-liberal governmental control; as experienced in France in recent years with the creation of the Agence d’évaluation de la recherche et de l’enseignement scientifique (AERES) and whose abolition was predictably announced by the socialist government shortly after it took power in 2012.

An additional point made by Díez Medrano concerns the intensity of the involvement of U.S. academics in evaluation as compared to their Spanish counterparts. The image of U.S. academics he provides may imply a generalization of norms of behavior found in some elite research universities to the U.S. academic world as a whole (which certainly includes a fair share of cynical non-participators). Whether the ideal community of readers is more homogeneous in the United States is an empirical matter that will be well worth investigating. Finally, his comment about how disciplinary consensus translates into interdisciplinary deference is a point well-taken that should also be ascertained through comparative research, just as it is the case for the emerging concern about the complex relationship between types of diversity and constructions of excellence in the distinctive context of European research.

Turning finally to Medvetz’s contribution, his point of departure is Bourdieu’s distinction between practical sense and theoretical reason as each manifests itself in research production. I must confess that while writing about the role of emotion in evaluation, I had forgotten about Bourdieu’s (1979) writing on practical sense and had not made the connection between his concerns and mine. Thus, I found Medvetz’s comparative discussion of our respective
approaches refreshing and informative. More generally, he raises the question of cognitive autonomy in the fields of knowledge production each of us studied. This comparison is significant given that, as Medvetz himself points out, academic and policy experts are now engaged in a most consequential war of influence over policy relevant knowledge. While the world of think tanks is not one where peer review matters, the latter is omnipresent in academia. Yet, in the world of policy making, as in academia, merit is assessed based on particular “social and interaction dynamics.” But, are these worlds more similar or different?

Medvetz convincingly points out three determinants (social, generative, and conditional) underlying constructions of autonomy across fields—each determinant feeding various notions of cognitive autonomy. The latter is always an illusion, to the extent that, from a radical interactionist perspective, autonomy is enabled by taken for granted agreements about ways to accomplish it.

Note that contra Medvetz, this perspective suggests more similarities than differences between the two worlds we study. Nevertheless, my sense of how this operates converges with the description he offers and I thank him for situating my contribution within the much-needed broader framework of the sociology of intellectuals and that of social knowledge in the making (Camic et al 2011). Much more could be said, and I hope that this exchange marks the beginning of a longer conversation.

Bibliographic References


