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## Introduction

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# Introduction

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Academic excellence and its social construction is far from being a classical issue in sociological research and debate. To be sure, the sociology of science has for long studied how intellectual reputations rise and are established, and how they impact on both intellectual production and the working of academic and scientific organizations. Based on the measurement of citations, bibliometrics is possibly the most renown and used research strategy for empirically assessing intellectual prestige and studying its correlates, its possible causes and its consequences. However, social scientists have not paid any special attention to the actual working of procedures and practices of evaluation as well as to its cognitive underpinning and its impact on the final assessment.

Over the last few years, with the rise of a knowledge economy and the growing economic importance attributed to intellectual production, the performance of academic and scholarly institutions has gained new resonance, also in the public sphere, and has entered the agenda not only of governments and public agencies, but also of social scientists (not necessarily confined to the specialized circles of the sociology of science).

Historically, a key mechanism for the evaluation of scientific production has been peer reviewing, and it is not surprising that this mechanism has attracted great attention both in the public sphere and in sociological debate. Based on the equal recognition of value, weight and dignity to all the participants in the deliberative judgment, peer reviewing is deemed crucial in almost all the decisional processes within

academia and the scientific establishment: selecting articles or books for publication, funding research projects, hiring temporary or tenured researchers and professors, etc. all presume a peer review process. Even bibliometrics – aimed to face the problems of an augmented scale of academic production, and willing to eliminate ‘subjective’ judgments in evaluation and to find a less time-consuming, possibly automatic, procedure – cannot avoid a previous rank of publications according to the relevance and prestige granted to journals and book series by peer reviewing procedures.

Firstly experienced in hard scientific research, and subsequently diffused also in the social and human sciences especially in the Anglo-American world, peer review has been adopted in the last few years also in many European and even non-Western countries, in some cases replacing other mechanisms of selection and evaluation usually based on more personalized criteria, in other cases introducing a system of evaluation which was previously totally absent.

Considering both the global rise of a knowledge society and the new centrality granted to intellectual production and even creativity, it is not surprising to see that peer review has been widely questioned in the last decade: does it really work in identifying excellence? Isn't it too much vulnerable to the particularistic interests at stake? Doesn't it prevent, with its encouragement of standardization, innovative and critical approach to emerge? As a model of evaluation, peer reviewing is not homogeneously spread within academic disciplines and environments, and its methodological working is very likely influenced by the cultural and institutional conditions in which it is applied, first of all by the characteristics of the national academic systems and especially by the degree of autonomy that the academic and scientific professions locally enjoy. Indeed, in the context of a so-called neoliberal hegemonic culture, a critical discourse about evaluation seems to be particularly crucial for the future of social sciences and humanities as a condition for their working just as critical forms of knowledge.

This is why “*Sociologica*” has decided to organize and offer its readers this symposium on evaluation and peer review focused on what is arguably the most sociological book devoted to this mechanism, Michèle Lamont's *How Professors Think. Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* [Lamont 2009].<sup>1</sup> The author of successful and influential books on the cultural dimensions of social inequalities [Lamont 1992, 2000] as well as of pioneering studies of intellectual reputations [Lamont 1987], Lamont is a Canadian who has studied in France and in the United States:

<sup>1</sup> The Symposium has been organized by the authors of this Introduction with the contribution of Matteo Bortolini. We are pleased to thank him for his precious help. We also thank the authors who have accepted to participate, and Michèle Lamont for her kind availability to engage herself in a discussion of her book.

her personal experiences of the academic world together with her scholarship in cultural analysis sensitizes her to the many variations that a system based on personal judgment inevitably encompasses. As the title suggests, the book approaches its object, i.e. the identification and evaluation of excellence in the (US) social and human sciences through peer review, from the perspective of the academic professional as the main actor in evaluative institutional settings. Its focus is on the cognitive and cultural mechanisms through which academicians (the “professors”) think in action while engaged in reviewing tasks and decisions, especially within funding committees. Her approach is deeply qualitative if not ethnographic – exactly the opposite of the bibliometrician’s. This is not the place where to discuss the book, however, as we have asked five (European) scholars to do this, each from his own perspective marked by a particular location in space (UK, Germany, France, Italy) and a specialized scholarship, be it in the field of the sociology of science (like in the case of Collins and Brian), cultural sociology (Inglis), the sociology of ideas and intellectuals (Angermuller), and behavioral economic sociology (Squazzoni). Instead of asking Lamont to present her ideas and the main results of her research, we have asked her to react to the readings and critical observations advanced by the five discussants, possibly furthering and assessing her same conclusions.

A final thought before letting the symposium start. As we have not asked the authors to describe or even evaluate their national experience, and almost none of them did, this is a good opportunity to spend a few words on the national case we had necessarily in mind while organizing this symposium, i.e. the Italian one. We do not believe we would exaggerate if we said that, read from this location, Lamont’s book really seems to describe an almost fantastic world, where peer review is the generally accepted rule and where discussions about worth and excellence are embedded in a widely shared culture of evaluation. But what happens when this is not the case?

Let us give the reader a few examples, having in mind the Italian sociological field in particular (indeed, as one of its main actors, Lamont doesn’t study this field in her book; but we have good reasons to think that the inclusion of the sociological field would not have changed her picture). In Italy, peer review is still practiced by a very few journals, and it has been adopted by the majority of the latter since only a very few years ago: the prevailing model of acceptance has long been, and still sometime is, the proposal by one prominent member of the Editorial Board, which is a social resource sufficient to guarantee publication. Most journals aren’t based on any clear cultural project or even the mutual choice of recognized and acknowledged peers, but on the belonging of the editors (and even the authors) to one of the (three) main national academic groups (or lobbies) which control the field [see Santoro 2009; Freschi and Santoro 2010]. Very often the journals’ editorial board are composed

by professors in the institutional position to personally control the access to careers and positions and by their direct pupils. A further example of the lack of a shared peer reviewing culture within the sociological field as a mark of the national academic life comes from the process of selection of researchers and professors for tenured positions, a particularly important decision for the system. Reading the judgments about the scientific production of the candidates on the ministerial website provides an experience full of surprises and it rises the doubt that the so called peers, i.e. full professors members of the commission, haven't received from the same candidate the same works, or, in some cases, they didn't read them at all. Even more surprisingly, not rarely does it happen that the peers, i.e. the commissioners, have never published in a peer reviewed journal, and even more rarely in an international one.

Looking at the efforts at evaluating the research performance of the national system, the first and still unique research assessment based on peer review (CIVR) scrutinized the works published between 2000-2003; the final report was delivered in 2008. The Panel on Social and Political Sciences was composed by internationally acknowledged and highly reputed scholars, who work or have worked both in Italy and abroad, and have a good knowledge of the national academic environment. The final judgment was far from being a positive one, especially with reference to the degree of internationalization and the average quality and relevance of the research production. As the president of the panel noticed later [see Bartolini 2007], the results of the evaluation was strongly affected by a relevant external factor, not by deficiencies of the peer review process. In fact, the great majority of the Italian social sciences departments selected the works to be submitted to evaluation on the basis of the seniority and institutional status of the authors, more than on the basis of shared criteria of scientific research quality. This hierarchical bias has led to undervalue the contribution of the younger or socially marginal scholars, with negative consequences on the assessment of this large research field in comparison with other ones. Of course, this evaluation process has been highly and widely criticized inside the sociological profession, especially its institutional leadership, as unfair and based on criteria and methods unable to assess real worth. Even the national association of the discipline (AIS) has taken some distance not only from the specific results but even from peer-reviewing "according to international standards" as a valid method of evaluation of sociological works and worths.

The peer review situation closer to the type analyzed by Lamont can possibly be found in the panels annually appointed by the Minister of Education, to assess the research projects of national interest (PRIN) to be funded with public money (the PRIN2009 funds two-years projects in all disciplines for a total amount of 103 millions Euros). It is not a secret among Italian sociologists that the decisions of

those panels, with respects to their proposals, is contingent on previous exchanges, alliances, agreements and even conflicts among the three main academic groups referred to above: the evaluation of the proposals and their quality comes only after these preliminary and very effective ‘academic’ arrangements.

To be fair, we should remember the peculiarities of the Italian university system in terms of both resources<sup>2</sup> and institutional structure. As Lamont suggests, the size, variety, dispersion and ‘weak ties’ which characterize the US academic environment, are structural conditions which favor the culture of peer evaluation. On the contrary, the Italian sociological field is small and crammed with strong ties – a clear antidote to the possibility of impartial and independent assessments.

The lack of a shared culture of evaluation is just one counterpart to the scarce autonomy of individual scholars from the (politically based or oriented) lobbies which structure their field, and to a sense of the academic profession much more as a power position than an intellectual pursuit. Indeed, in these conditions it is difficult even to imagine a research project like Lamont’s.

The implication of this brief account is clear and at the same time worth of further research: as a system of evaluation, the peer review mechanism *in practice* can only reflect, and reproduce, the schemata and logics of the academic culture in which it is embedded and for which it is asked to work. What the peer review produces as a way to assess excellence is closely contingent on the kinds of excellence of the presumed “peers” – the latter being a category which in itself doesn’t offer any guarantee in terms of intellectual quality, excellence or originality, and fairness.

This is indeed one further reason which makes *How Professor Thinks* a fascinating reading for Italian sociologists, possibly even more than for their counterparts elsewhere – including the same US scholars she has elected as her study’s subjects. A fascinating and possibly useful reading especially for those Italian sociologists who still hope in a normalization of their field, which doesn’t mean a standardization and acritical adoption of internationally established methods of evaluation – which, as Lamont confirms, are far from being perfect and universally applicable as such – but

<sup>2</sup> It is enough to have a look at the OECD data ([Education at a glance 2010](#)) to realize the distance between Italy and the US. For example, the public expenditure in tertiary education as percentage of public expenditure in 2007 was 3.3 in the US; 1.6 in Italy. The private expenditure (excluding the expenditure of the households) as a percentage of the total expenditure on tertiary education was 34.2 in the US; 8.2 in Italy. In the last years there have been further reductions of the public spending for the university. The expenditure can be taken as an indicator of the features of the economic system, but also of the cultural relevance assigned to the university system. Although we could hypothesize that financial resources could impact on evaluation in a reverse relation, i.e. less the resources, more the need of a strong culture of evaluation (this is not what happens in Italy, however), it is also possible that, below a certain line of available resources perverse, particularistic effects could be sparked.

a critical engagement with other experiences and traditions from which to imagine a possible future.

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## **Introduction**

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