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Rationality and Autonomy. Thinking About Academia with Michèle Lamont

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Rationality and Autonomy

Thinking About Academia with Michèle Lamont

by David Inglis

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Could any professor in the world not want to read a book entitled *How Professors Think* [Lamont 2009]? After all, there is nothing that any academic likes more than talking and thinking about themselves. So the promise of having one's thought processes laid bare – especially by an author as eminent as Professor Lamont – is bound to get one's interest more than piqued. I imagine that the book has already sold very well, and will continue to do so, as it promises for its primary prospective readers a peek into their own souls – or at the very least, their own committee rooms.

And when one reads the book, so it comes to pass. There are many flashes of recognition of the sort of world one customarily inhabits. One of the noteworthy features of Michèle Lamont's oeuvre is the clarity of her prose. This serves her well in this context, as the minutiae of how interdisciplinary grant-awarding panels – the empirical focus of the book – actually work come across loud and clear. Anyone who has sat on such a panel, or indeed any sort of university committee, will appreciate only too well the best and worst and academic practice represented here, from the jaw-dropping arrogance and filibustering longwindedness of some panellists, to the earnest attempts to be fair, and to be seen to be fair, on the behalf of more reasonable colleagues – or at least colleagues who are more skilled at the performance and demonstration of what is taken to be reasonableness.

It is this latter point that I think is one of the central points of the book: that such panels operate in large part through norms whereby reasonableness in decisions and outcomes is achieved through the self-presentation of being reasonable. Certain

types of social performance – being seen to be fair to disciplines other than one's own, not engaging in disciplinary imperialism and personal grandstanding, being seen to pay careful attention to experts in the field relevant to the grant application under discussion, and so on – are governed by expectations as to what counts as being not just a professional, but also more broadly, what counts as being a rational human being. Under such conditions, the ability to compromise with others is highly valued, at the same time as compromise can work as a way to get what you want: I won't fight for this application, as there's another one just down the line that I really want to weigh in on.

As I understand it, having demonstrated the nature of these micro-processes of decision-making, and their normative and social-psychological underpinnings, the book's central claim is that such a system generally and in a rough-and-ready sort of way, sort of "works." As the result of human thought and practice, such a system of course contains within it all sorts of biases and prejudices – how could it not? But through the very nature of the interactions engaged in at the negotiating table, the system produces something resembling fairness, or certainly does not result in outright unfairness. Occupying a privileged position in various academic hierarchies – to do with one's institution's perceived ranking, one's discipline's standing relative to others, one's ethnicity, one's gender, and so on – does not necessarily guarantee a successful grant application, because much depends on the micro-processes of horse-trading that goes on within particular meetings.

The book's main theoretical stance is aimed against Pierre Bourdieu [1990] – or perhaps more accurately, against the cruder and more mechanistic applications of his account of field in general and the academic field in particular. On a simplistic Bourdieusian reading, grant-awarding panels are thoroughly dominated by various sorts of hegemonic players, those rich in institutional and disciplinary capitals, who wield de facto monopoly over the carving out of the available largesse. Very few crumbs from the rich man's table ever fall to the subordinate players in the field, because the elite have the game all stitched up, even to the point of themselves misrecognising what is really a game of power as in fact an exercise in impartial rationality. In line with various other lines of thought in the sociology of culture today, all dissatisfied with Bourdieu's orientation towards the exposure of all practices as apparently expressions of elite power, Lamont's analysis adopts a more pragmatist framework, taking the micro-processes of decision-making as important and efficacious in themselves, rather than as the reflexes of a game dominated by those who are (apparently) the incontrovertible power-holders within it.

This distancing from a cruder form of Bourdieusianism is understandable. After all, if we accept it wholly as is, we are confronted with the inevitable result that the

world is truly and simply a Hobbesian nightmare, and that the ways that professors think, when analysed properly, reveal that they are both scoundrels (because their whole *modus vivendi* is about winning and holding onto power) and fools (because they do not, and indeed cannot, recognise this fact, misperceiving their practice as if it were whiter than white). Such conclusions would be uncomfortable ones for professors to draw, both those on the left who have a self-image as critics of power, and those on the right who see themselves as bastions against foolishness. And it is precisely the highly discomfiting nature of such conclusions that could lead an orthodox Bourdieusian critic to claim that Professor Lamont's book has let academia off the hook, for it adopts a tone too accepting of the accounts offered by professors themselves of what they do. An unsympathetic reading of the book could conclude that by relying in large part on interviews with grant panellists, examining how they talk about and justify what they did on panels, Professor Lamont does not interrogate enough the self-interested and self-deluding nature of their apologies. One could wonder whether the method and the data fit too neatly with the theoretical aims, namely to depict academic thinking and practice in ways which stress its (situated) rationality far more than a Bourdieusian viewpoint would allow.

Yet such a critique would take at face value the Hobbesian-Machiavellian-Nietzschean elements of Bourdieu's sociology [Inglis 2010]. A more meaningful response might involve focussing on the meaning of the concept of *illusio* and what roles it could play here. In Bourdieu, it has at least two meanings or dimensions. In the first, more basic, instance, it refers to intersubjectively-held assumptions that have to be held amongst all persons involved in a given common endeavour. For that endeavour to continue over time, all participants must believe in the point and purpose of it, otherwise they would not be able to continue participating within it. This is the Bourdieusian version of broader existentialist and social-constructionist notions about the need for meaning in human life. In the second sense, the *illusio* of any particular game has a more specific meaning, one connected to the unequal power relations that shape most human activities. Here, for the game to continue, both the more powerful and the less powerful have to believe that the game is worth playing. In modern, apparently egalitarian, societies this generally takes the form of the game being very unfair, but both winners and losers imagining it to be fair, with elites over time feeling confirmed in this belief (the best players won), and the dominated also continuing to believe it (we lost because we are stupid, untalented, fated to lose, etc.).

It seems to me that the real difference between the sorts of analyses proposed by Bourdieu and Lamont rests in matters to do with illusion. On the Bourdieusian reading, in the grant-decisions panel or in any other institutionalised feature of life, both academic and extra-academic, the illusion of the game is always about misrecog-

nition by the players of underlying power structures. They think the game is fair, but is not really: this is the analytic logic of Enlightenment-derived exposure of power. And because they endlessly misrecognise the real nature of the game they are playing, a certain sort of self-fulfilling prophecy arises, with the powerful always getting the lion's share of resources and the powerless making do with a pittance or nothing at all. By contrast, the Lamont reading holds that the players – in this case, the committee members – have a commitment to the general ideas of fairness, balance, diligence and so on. And because of this commitment, they work with others, present themselves to others and present themselves to themselves, as if all that were indeed the case. The end result of this type of illusion is that the system entails a self-fulfilling prophecy: it believes itself to be roughly fair, and because the actors subscribe to that belief and try hard to act in line with its perceived demands, they go some way, perhaps a long way, to achieving that aim. So for Bourdieu, misrecognised belief in the system's fairness must always be implicated with mechanisms that (unconsciously) lead to unfairness; but for Lamont, commitments to fairness lead to micro-processes that put checks on unfairness and are productive of something resembling some sort of justice. While a Bourdieusian position would have us believe that how professors think is a cause for revulsion and even despair, the Lamont view pushes towards a carefully calibrated optimism.

There are issues both broad and deep at work here, about the nature of human rationality itself, that the relatively compact nature of Lamont's book does not immediately indicate, but which are revealed the more one thinks about the way Lamont thinks against (and on occasions, with) Bourdieu. There is more at work here than first meets the eye.

Which position one is more oriented to may well be a matter of the reader's individual taste – although we know from Bourdieu how socially-structured and game-dependent that may be. Indeed, the problem is how to review and assess from within the contemporary academy an academic work that is about how academics think? Multiple issues of reflexivity are involved, including to do with one's own relative academic positioning. Readers who are successful grant-holders may feel gratified about the nature of the claims here – the implication is that their research was funded through a process that in its own particular ways can and does recognise "quality." By contrast, those whose careers have been characterised by less successful engagements with funders and other bodies may feel much more of an elective affinity with the Bourdieusian worldview. So there are various knotty problems involved in controlling for one's own dispositions as one reads the text, just as the peer reviewers studied by Professor Lamont had to engage in often quite complex processes of self-control and self-presentation. It would be interesting in a few years' time to compare

how this book was reviewed and responded to by different sorts of people, with how Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* [Bourdieu 1990] was received at the time of publication. Professor Lamont's book is likely not a "book for burning" (as Bourdieu ironically referred to his own text), but comparing differential responses to both tomes will be a compelling topic for future historians of the field of sociology and how it has thought about the nature of the academic system in which sociology is embedded.

Although *How Professors Think* is focussed on interdisciplinary grant-awarding panels, it has broader implication for how we think professors think. As a journal editor, it got me thinking about an issue very much at the heart of my professional practice, namely the nature of peer review for academic journals. If one followed a strong Bourdieusian line here, then one might want to say that peer review is phoney: it claims to be about impartial and anonymous assessment of submitted manuscripts, but it is in fact largely about the policing of the intellectual field that the journal operates within. Editors and referees work, for the most part without realising it, to print in the journal what suites their various interests: publishing work which most fits with their specific sense of appropriateness, correctness, and relevance. Work which does not meet these requirements will be excluded, despite the fact that it can be quite as "good" as work which is accepted. This is not just simple nepotism, for we could admit, staying within the Bourdieusian frame, that instances of referees eulogising work which is supposedly being anonymously reviewed but which they have recognised as the output of colleagues, friends, and respected "big names," is relatively rare. The gate-keeping by and large goes on in more subterranean ways: work is accepted because it is written in a certain manner, deploys certain wordings and tones, and generally feels "right" for reasons rooted in the depths of intellectual habitus. If this is true, then certain sorts of authors are at a great disadvantage in the world of peer-reviewing, generally those who lack the language skills of the system's insiders, such as postgraduates, early career scholars, those in less prestigious and teaching-intensive institutions, and – in the case of English-language journals – non-native speakers and those who exist in countries regarded as peripheral in the academic world-system.

I suspect that all journal editors, if they were being wholly open, would recognise these sorts of issues in their own editing practices. This may be made more acute nowadays than it was hitherto by factors such as publishers putting great stress on how journals only survive in the increasingly difficult world economic climate if university libraries keep subscribing to them. Subscriptions are kept up by librarians if journals are seen – through the means of various technological mechanisms – to be widely used and widely cited. Citation indices are increasingly taken as indicative of a journal's standing in its field, and thus of its academic-economic viability. Citation rates are certainly a kind of game, for keeping them high involves editors choosing

work for publication that they think will be widely cited. And what they think will be highly cited involves judgements about what is currently, and will in the near future, be the fashionable terms and topics in that journal's field.

A rather fantastic irony here is that the inclusion in the title, abstract or keywords of a paper of the very term "Bourdieu" has up until recently been a good way for editors in sociology and related areas to try to ensure that that paper will be widely cited; but as the worldwide Bourdieu industry goes into decline over time, as it inevitably must, then the power of this signifier, and its role in citation index games, will also diminish, perhaps very quickly [Santoro 2011]. There are signs in certain fields that the new keyword "Latour" has already overtaken Bourdieu in the indexing and citation sweepstakes. This all has great ramifications for how, and how well, Bourdieu's sociology will be remembered in the future. It is clear that citation indices are going to play a large but probably largely subterranean role in this regard. When Sartre's and Althusser's stars waned, it was not to do with internet technologies, search engines and citation rates. But Bourdieu's posthumous reputation, and whether he is remembered in fifty years' time, will have everything to do with such matters. That is not to deny, of course, that his reputation will also rise or fall by more traditional means, such as being dealt with either dismissively or sympathetically by book authors such as Professor Lamont...

Perusal of and reflection on *How Professors Think* gives an alternative way of conceiving how journals – including the one I am writing in now – work. Just like Professor Lamont's panel members, it seems to me that most of the referees of papers I work with have some qualified belief in the peer review system. They share the illusion that the system generally, or at least, sort-of works. This impacts profoundly not just on how they review but whether they engage in reviewing at all: why would you agree to an editor's request to review a piece if you thought the whole system as corrupt from top-to-toe? Reviewers not only do their best to be "fair" in their appraisals – they enact that fairness by writing reports that want to be seen to be fair. They engage in argumentative strategies that simultaneously evaluate the paper and seek to justify the nature of that evaluation. I would say that the best kinds of reviews are those that are small-scale embodiments of Habermasian principles, for they do not just state claims to truth but engage in a careful justification of why those particular truth claims are being made. They involve not *de haut en bas* statements but rather attempts to talk to the author as sympathetic, but hard-edged, interlocutor. They are neither self-consciously against the academic fashions of the day – the temptation of mannered old-fogeyism – but neither are they imprisoned by what the intellectual field in question fetishizes as its current over-riding concerns.

When an editor works with such reviews, it often brings out her better qualities, centred around endeavours to be fair and impartial even when – or rather, precisely because of – being aware of the many limitations, both existential and historical, that mitigate against that. In this way, if a journal is being run effectively, it exists as two things simultaneously: a mechanism of field reproduction and a gate-keeping device that can work in the interests of the dominant, *a la* Bourdieu, and a challenge to that state of affairs, operating as a form of situated, no doubt imperfect but nonetheless potentially powerful rationality, *a la* Lamont.

In his later years, Bourdieu championed the defence of autonomous fields against the heteronomous forces of capitalist economy and neo-liberal state. What Michelle Lamont has demonstrated is that there is perhaps still more autonomy in the university systems of the advanced capitalist countries than a more pessimistic Bourdieusianism would admit. This is a matter of no little importance at the present time. In my own country, the Cameron government under the guise of radical scaling-back of government indebtedness is now engaged in a project of university financial reorganisation so undermining of the academic field's autonomy that it would make Mrs. Thatcher's ideologues blush. The defence of the situated rationalities of that field calls for a uniting of what Professor Lamont argues here with the Bourdieu of the field-autonomy writings. For it is only in academic fields with relative autonomy that the kinds of tendencies towards fairness to others and doing one's best to reach rational consensus, can exist. If Michèle Lamont has demonstrated what is more appealing and positive about academic thinking, practice and judgements, she has also shown how fragile such achievement are, and how easily they are destroyed, especially – it seems to me – by the *illusio* which animates contemporary global capitalism after the Crash.

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Abstract: Michèle Lamont's dissection of the minutiae of how interdisciplinary grant-awarding panels operate is deployed in order to understand more broadly the nature and dynamics of academic classifications and judgements. The account she offers goes against an orthodox Bourdieusian reading of the academic field, regarding it as exhibiting more tendencies towards cooperation and good will than Bourdieu's sociology would have averred. This paper examines Lamont's argument, locating within it the source of both divergences from, and overlaps with, Bourdieu's understanding of the university field. The issues are worked through in terms of reflections upon a particular type of academic gate-keeping, namely the editing of journals. It is proposed that the kind of micro-sociological approach deployed by Lamont should be conjoined with the politics of defending forms of field autonomy developed by the later Bourdieu.

Keywords: University, academic field, gate-keeping, Lamont, Bourdieu.

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