

by FRED INGLIS

How Professors Think: inside the curious world of academic judgement
by Michèle Lamont

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In 2005 Jerome Groopman published his *How Doctors Think*, an exemplary ethnography of professional thought in action as it veers between science, teaching (especially patients), ignorance, fear, and decision. By contrast, what is most strikingly absent from *How Professors Think* is any evidence of thought at all, whether on the part of the author or on the part of her unstoppably garrulous, reliably vacuous research subjects.

The book is the product of a full-dress piece of institutional research paid for, I do not doubt handsomely, by assorted American learned councils, led by a prominent scholar of African and American Studies at Harvard no less, published by Harvard no less, and reporting her extended inquiries by way of interviews and written interrogation on how a large number of panellists decided to award or withhold grants from the huddled masses of postgraduates queuing up to write theses and win posts.

It's a good enough idea. In such ruminations, surely, one will find in living play the vivid counterpoint of those intellectual values and virtues which it is the joy and duty of the academic life to cherish and nurture on behalf of the common good (I write quite without irony). The descent from these noble and substantial ideals to the flatulent pages of this book makes quite a wallop.

The best way to register one's disappointment would probably be merely to quote and quote again: quote on the one hand Professor Lamont's elaborate display less of a proper detachment, more of a bland indifference; then to quote on the other, her subjects' unvarying self-entrancement, their utter lack of the qualities for which they are supposedly searching among the supplicants, their slack and cretinous diction, their awful clichés, at best, their uncontentious complicity in low denominations.

Thus the author, "opening the black box of peer review", calls us to order with ringing bathos: "'Excellence' [like so many of the big words, inevitably set in scare-quotes] is the holy grail of academic life". But don't miss one of her interlocutors (assessing an unexpected proposal on refuse disposal).

I remember reading this proposal and going, this is either a, no pun intended, but a bunch of shit, or it's just a waste, no pun intended again, or it's really brilliant. And it seemed to be very self-referential in the language he was using to craft the proposal.

The grace and fluency of this is agreeably matched by the crisp incisiveness of this professor of English whose epigram for the common pursuit of true judgement is "so most of the time I feel like I know where they're coming from and they kind of know where I'm coming from".

The complete absence of the *thought* which is her purported subject is silhouetted by the broken promise of the subtitle: there is no 'inside' to the book at all. The account given by the subjects is quite without inwardness or powers of self-reflection just as the commentator herself refuses close analysis or empathetic scrutiny of any kind, perhaps in the name of keeping a judicious distance from the personal, perhaps out of sheer incapacity.

The author's chosen constituency is confined to the humanities and social scientists. Throughout the book, one cannot but feel the looming presence of Pierre Bourdieu's Swiftian masterpiece, *Homo Academicus*, reviewed in these pages twenty years ago, mentioned only once in an erratic index, though turning up several times in the body of the text.

Professor Lamont, alas, makes no use of Bourdieu's caustic theorisation of disciplinary boundaries even though it is central to her task. Perhaps out of a gingerly fear of giving offence, she does not have Bourdieu's brisk way with academic hierarchy nor dares to touch, still less explain the resentments smouldering beneath (say) low-order education and high-status philosophy. Sixty years after Wittgenstein, she still ratifies the non-existent distinction between quantitative and qualitative inquiry, and seventy years after Collingwood's *Essay on Metaphysics* fails to identify the entire topic of the book as being those 'absolute presuppositions' without which we could make no judgements of any kind but the too-much forcing of which into the daylight afflicts us with such acute photophobia.

The whole research inquiry is vitiated by its failure ever to ground the vocabulary of discrimination in its object. Thought is *about* something. To know what her hapless respondents mean by excellence or originality, let alone the imaginativeness which never climbs into the tables of, in the unspeakable jargon, "generic and specific types", we would have to read the applications. Come to that, we would have to read the panellists' own books. Maybe, as Bourdieu does – even while he makes us wince at the vicious snobbery of the *Ecoles Normales* as he delivers them to our consternation, and we sit back relieved that the Americans are innocent of *that* degree of boundary-beating – she should have analysed a few academic obituaries or job references.

According to this plodding tour however, and the title notwithstanding, the academic world is *incurious*, tired and trivial-minded, loose as to judgement, lax as to thought, kindly and liberal-minded, wanting to go home.