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Mary Ann Dzuback

Washington University in St Louis, madzubac@wustl.edu

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Professionalism, Higher Education, and American Culture: Burton J. Bledstein's
The Culture of Professionalism
Mary Ann Dzuback
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Burton Bledstein classed his book *The Culture of Professionalism* with the work of the giants in American academic history. He suggested that his theory of the culture of professionalism ranked in significance with Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, Charles A. Beard's industrialization theories, and Perry Miller's analysis of Puritanism. Bledstein's fresh historical perspective on higher education and his skepticism regarding professional authority no doubt were shaped by his experiences at elite public and private institutions, the University of California at Los Angeles (B.A., 1959) and Princeton (Ph.D., 1967). He has spent his whole professional life in one public institution, the University of Illinois at Chicago, with brief interludes provided by fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1972–73) and the University of Chicago (1977–1978), the latter in recognition of his book.¹

The Culture of Professionalism was well received in the world of academic publishing. It was reviewed extensively, in law, medicine, social work, history, nursing, education, and social science journals, and in popular publications. Although Bledstein's impact on the historical literature has not equaled that of Turner, Beard, or Miller, his study continues to be cited in works focusing on the professions, higher education, and late nineteenth-century American culture.

Historians analyzing the links between professionalism and class aspirations, or urban growth and professions, cannot ignore Bledstein's book. One finds references to it in studies of the use of scientific expertise in constructing normative values, of the relationship between knowledge acquisition and status, and of the university's role in shaping individual and class identity. Bledstein's concept of the "vertical vision" in professional development has been frequently invoked in discussions of professionalization and status advancement. Clearly, the book has been important in shaping our understanding of one social role of the modern university.²

¹ Burton R. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York, 1976). The following book reviews and essays helped me to analyze the impact of Bledstein's book: Michael Schudson, *School Review* 86 (November 1977): 137-40; Henrika Kuklick, *Journal of American History* 68 (June 1981): 152-53; Charles D. Biebel, "Higher Education and Old Professionalism," *History of Education Quarterly* 17 (Fall 1977): 319-25; Donald M. Scott, "The Mystique of Professionalism," *Reviews in American History* 6 (September 1978): 299-305; Thomas L. Haskell, "Power to the Experts," *New York Review of Books* (13 October 1977): 28-33; Laurence Vesey, *Academe* 65 (February 1979): 61-62; Stuart M. Blumin, "The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals," *American Historical Review* 90 (April 1985): 299-338; and Barbara Melosh, "'Not Merely a Profession': Nurses and Resistance to Professionalization," *American Behavioral Scientist* 32 (July/August 1989): 668-79.

² Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 105. Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley, Calif., 1977); Stuart Blumin, "The Hypothesis of Middle-Class

The *Culture of Professionalism* presented a novel argument: conceptions of the modern university were forming concurrently with the middle-class search for a new self-identity in the mid-nineteenth century. The development of modern higher education and of the American middle class was not only timely, but also mutually beneficial. To articulate this argument, Bledstein examined the lives and aspirations of leading university men. Charles Eliot of Harvard, Noah Porter of Yale, Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins, Andrew Dickson White of Cornell, Frederick A.P. Barnard of Columbia, James McCosh of Princeton, James Burrill Angell of Michigan, John Bascom of Wisconsin, and William W. Folwell of Minnesota embodied the characteristics and search for identity that Bledstein used to define both middle-class values and professional aspirations. It is therefore not surprising that the university became the focus of his analysis of the development of professional culture and the role of expertise in that development. He contended that the curricular offerings and social atmosphere at the "old time college" disturbed all of these men, and led to student discontent and rebellion in the first half of the nineteenth century. Seeking both career mobility for themselves and stability for the institutions of higher education they led, university presidents found new models of scholarship and institutional organization in the German universities.

The belief that German universities provided models for American institutions was not new in higher education historiography in 1976. Bledstein made extensive and largely uncritical use of the work of Walter Metzger and Richard Hofstadter, John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, Laurence Veysey, and Frederick Rudolph in his study. The one exception to Bledstein's general acceptance of these historians' research and conclusions was his argument that they were insufficiently critical of the ways institutions shaped social culture and individual and class identity. That critical point was the focus of Bledstein's work and led to his major contribution to the history of American higher education. By analyzing how definitions of public and private space changed in mid-nineteenth-century America and how American reformers chose to frame the social problem of ungoverned youth, he made a plausible case for his contentions about the university's ascendance as a cultural institution and about middle-class men's search for a new self-identity. But problems abound in Bledstein's uncritical incorporation of the assumptions embedded in these prior historical accounts.³

Earlier arguments about the parochialism, isolation, and instability of the nineteenth-century college were essential to support Bledstein's assertions about the significance of this historical moment in the mid-nineteenth-century search for legitimacy through the creation of a culture of professionalism. However, prior to the appearance of *The Culture of Professionalism*, several historians had already questioned this interpretation. David Potts, in the *History of Education Quarterly* had reexamined

Formation"; Thomas L. Haskell, ed., *The Authority of Experts* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984); David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915-40* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986).

³ Richard Hofstadter and Walter Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York 1955); John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1956* (New York, 1958); Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago, 1965); Frederick Rudolph *The American College and University: A History* (New York 1962).

assertions of parochialism in college founding in the antebellum period and had suggested that the simplistic, one-dimensional picture of college founding and finance was not supported by primary research into the colleges' origins. David Allmendinger's work, to which Bledstein referred, had demonstrated that the college-going youth of the antebellum period not only increasingly came from poor New England farm families but also became leaders in their communities. College did not emerge in the post-Civil War period as a means of status advancement; for poor, white, New England boys, it already had become that by 1860. Douglas Sloan, in the *Teachers College Record*, had reexamined the curriculum of the antebellum college. Sloan's work had refuted the belief that the curriculum and pedagogy of the college were largely arid, dull, unchanging, and unresponsive to students throughout the antebellum period.⁴

These findings do not suggest that the nineteenth-century college was never dreary for the young men who enrolled, but rather that the picture was not as bleak as Bledstein would have had his readers believe. Bledstein relied on the reflections of university leaders for primary material. These leaders were all involved in transforming their institutions to respond to public needs they perceived and to emerging approaches to science and scholarship. Bledstein's reliance on their depictions led him to the curiously ahistorical conclusion that the colleges exhibited an "immature state of academic culture."⁵

Moreover, by focusing on these accounts, Bledstein missed entirely the role of the Second Great Awakening and associated reform efforts in shaping youth culture in the antebellum period. He ignored the abolitionist movement, and he paid little attention to the temperance movement. Had he read in the diaries and journals of ordinary students at some of these antebellum colleges, Bledstein might have found that the recollections of older university administrators belied the fervor that shaped student participation in these political crusades. Such primary source materials contain rich details about the intellectual and moral doubts that drove students to seek further education. College student behavior, in other words, did not merely manifest itself in riots and violence, which were used to justify a more rigorous curriculum to control young people. Upon examining these kinds of materials, one also finds that participation in extracurricular activities did not serve merely as an effort to "get ahead" socially in the middle nineteenth century.

Bledstein's narrow view of higher educational leaders', and students', motives was compounded by several problems. One was the author's reliance on university leaders to define the characteristics of both the middle class and professional culture. These characteristics corresponded closely to Anglo-Protestant ideas regarding the traits that made up a good character: industriousness, civility, perfection of talents, self-discipline, and pursuit of a "calling." These ideas were, in turn, similar to Puritan ideas about the civil man, much as Benjamin Franklin translated them into secular terms a full century

⁴ David B. Potts, "American Colleges in the Nineteenth Century: From Localism to Denominationalism," *History of Education Quarterly* 11 (Winter 1971): 363-80; David F. Allmendinger, Jr., *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York, 1975); Douglas Sloan, "Harmony, Chaos, and Consensus: The American College Curriculum," *Teachers College Record* 73 (December 1971): 221-51.

⁵ Bledstein, *Culture*, 271.

before they, as Bledstein claimed, shaped a new middle class. Were the "new" middle-class values rooted in a restless urge to redefine self-identity in a time of change, or did they in fact emerge from an earlier inheritance? In discussing the characteristics of professionalism, Bledstein presents descriptive concepts including careerism, standardization of rules, organizational hierarchies, and expansion and growth. In a sense Bledstein's argument became self-perpetuating and self-defining. Using university men to articulate the characteristics of class and behavior, and using universities as the locus of this culture led to circular reasoning. One example, in the context of an assertion that universities nurtured the professional self-image of businessmen, highlights this problem: "From the beginning [of university founding] the ego-satisfying pretensions of professionalism have been closer to the heart of the middle-class American than the raw profits of capitalism."⁶ Bledstein did not demonstrate how he came to this conclusion, nor what its implications were.

Another problem was that Bledstein virtually ignored the other quasi- and postsecondary institutions of the mid-nineteenth century, such as mechanics' institutes, normal schools, and theological seminaries. How did these institutions treat the developing aspirations of the middle class as Bledstein defined it? What were the personal characteristics they held up as models for students? Did they encourage the individualism and self-seeking necessary to personal success that Bledstein claims were reflected in the goals of university men?

What would happen if one were to move beyond Bledstein's limited view of postsecondary education, his flawed image of the nineteenth-century college, and his reliance on university men's life stories for defining professionalism and middle-class aspirations? First, one might begin to explore the role of institutions other than colleges in shaping perceived needs. Second, one might also date the beginning of aspirations to middle-class status much earlier, particularly for that small percentage of the white male population with access to postsecondary institutions. Colin B. Burke's research into these institutions and their roles in students' lives is exemplary of such efforts. Third, by moving beyond a reliance on the stories of university men, the close and highly specific relationship between universities and the culture of professionalism need not be disproved, but our understanding of the culture of professionalism would be broadened. Professionalism may well have been nurtured as vigorously elsewhere, in professional societies (to which Bledstein alluded), in technical institutes, in hospitals, courts, schools, corporations, and by agencies (such as those certifying competence), and philanthropic foundations. As Ellen Lagemann, Konrad Jarausch, and other historians have demonstrated, the relationship between professionalism and higher education is far more complex than Bledstein allowed.⁷

This definition set the framework for Bledstein's functional and, to some extent,

⁶ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁷ Colin B. Burke, *American Collegiate Populations: A Test of the Traditional View* (New York, 1982); Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *Private Power for the Public Good: A History of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching* (Middletown, Conn. 1983); Konrad H. Jarausch, "Higher Education and Social Change: Some Comparative Perspectives," in *The Transformation of Higher Learning: Expansion, Diversification, Social Opening, and Professionalization in England, Germany, Russia, and the United States*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (Chicago, 1983), 9-36. See also note 10, below.

psychological analysis of the culture of professionalism and its relation to the developing middle class. But Bledstein's analysis was vague, particularly because he did not examine the causal factors in the development of this culture. Suggesting that social and institutional change had internal, psychodynamic repercussions, Bledstein as a historian was taking a big risk. He discussed psychological processes—more specifically, the development of self-identity—apart from larger material changes occurring in the second half of the nineteenth century. By so interrelating the factors determining professionalism, Bledstein was unable to step outside the culture of professionalism to examine its social or historical context and by framing it in psychological terms, he claimed for the culture a larger impact than it had. The culture he described was crucial to his argument regarding how professionals gained authority and the ways they chose to exercise that authority. Bledstein's work has made the university's role in this process of gaining and exercising authority more explicit to historians of the professions and of higher education. Yet this role was not as monolithic as Bledstein suggested. The percentage of professionals in the population remained extremely small from the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. Laurence Veysey offered these census figures: 3.78% of the whole population in 1890; 4.4% in 1920; 8% in 1960; and 13% in 1970. Far from encompassing the whole middle class, professionals represented only a small segment. In short, Bledstein's risk did not pay off.⁸

The prestige and authority that Bledstein assigned to professionals and their functions also raise questions. As we know from more recent work in the history and sociology of professions, not all professions were considered equal in prestige. Not all were perceived by others to possess an unassailable authority in people's everyday lives. Immigrants' suspicion of physicians well into the second decade of the twentieth century, and distrust of the whole medical establishment, suggest that Bledstein's assertions lacked real historical grounding. He did not account for the subtleties inherent in the power and authority relationships between clients and professionals and between and within professions over time; nor did he account for the ways different groups participated in professionalization. Studies abound that offer alternative visions of professionalization and the role of professionals, particularly women, ethnic minorities, and non-middle-class groups, in history: Regina Morantz-Sanchez, Mary Roth Walsh, and Kenneth Ludmerer on medicine; Jerold Auerbach and Robert Stevens on law; Margaret Rossiter, Geraldine Clifford, and Ellen Fitzpatrick on the academic profession; Nathan O. Hatch on the ministry; Donald Warren and Jurgen Herbst on teaching; and Barbara Melosh, Darlene Clark Hine, and Susan Reverby on nursing. The route was not as fixed, and the motives not as focused on status seeking, as Bledstein suggested in his work.⁹

⁸ See note 2, above.

⁹ Regina Morantz Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine* (New York, 1985); Mary Roth Walsh, *"Doctors Wanted: No Women Need Apply": Sexual Barriers in the Medical Profession, 1835-1975* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); Kenneth M. Ludmerer, *Learning to Heal: The Development of American Medical Education* (New York, 1985); Jerold Auerbach, *Unequal Justice: Lawyers and Social Change in Modern America* (New York, 1976); Robert Stevens, *Law School: Legal Education in America from the 1850s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1983); Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggle and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore, 1982); Geraldine Joncich Clifford, *Lone Voyagers: Academic Women in Coeducational*

This issue of status seeking deserves closer scrutiny. Bledstein's psychological and cultural argument about the desire for prestige, power, authority—his concept of "vertical vision"—rested on his contention that social advancement was the major motivating factor behind the middle class pursuit of higher education and professional attainment. No one familiar with early and recent historical literature about higher education and the professions would deny that the desire for advancement played a role in the quest for professional status, but to what extent was this the case? Because Bledstein ignored the material bases of change, particularly in the formation of the middle class in nineteenth-century America, he overemphasized the status issue in fashioning his story of the development of the culture of professionalism. A brief analysis of proportional demographic shifts among age groups in the latter half of the nineteenth century supported his argument regarding the growing class of independent youth seeking work other than their fathers'.¹⁰ Such a limited demographic argument did not explain a number of other, possibly more important, factors shaping the middle class.

Mary P. Ryan's study of Oneida County, New York, is based on copious evidence of the complex network of influences on class formation in that region. She offered a rich social analysis of the changing nature of work and the effect it had on the local economy. She described the declining birth rate, the kinds of values families nurtured in the young, the role of work places, voluntary associations, and churches in promulgating those values, families' efforts to keep young men and women home for longer periods, and delayed marriages among young men. She examined in great detail the sources of social change that led to middle-class formation there and in so doing, demonstrated just how complicated the material factors were and how they, in turn, shaped ideas about occupational and social roles in Oneida County. Granted, Bledstein's project was of a different order; he was not studying families, or social and economic organization. Yet, such a work as Ryan's raises questions about the close, inevitable developmental relationship Bledstein drew between the culture of professionalism (as he defined it) and middle-class formation.¹¹

Bledstein's assertion regarding middle-class professional motivations is another problem that emerged from the lack of material basis for his argument. He gave little attention to other major social and economic changes occurring during the period. Urbanization, industrialization, and immigration have been the focus of much work among social historians of the late nineteenth century. Science was not, as Bledstein

Universities, 1870-1937 (New York, 1989); Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform* (New York, 1990); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn., 1989); Donald R. Warren, ed., *American Teachers: A History of a Profession at Work* (New York, 1989); Jurgen Herbst, *And Sadly Teach: Teacher Education and Professionalization in American Culture* (Madison, Wisc., 1989); Barbara Melosh, *"The Physician's Hand": Work, Culture, and Conflict in American Nursing* (Philadelphia, 1982); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989); Susan Reverby, *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing, 1850-1945* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987).

¹⁰ Bledstein, *Culture*, 206-07.

¹¹ Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County* (Cambridge, Eng., 1981).

implied, solely or primarily a source of self-serving power for professionals, academics, and social service workers. Scientific knowledge and authority may well have served that function for some professionals; however, to assume the powerful used that authority for their own gain is to overlook the benevolent intentions of their work. Focusing on university presidents as professionals, and arguing that their efforts were fueled mainly by the desire to advance their own institutions and careers, allowed Bledstein to deemphasize the very real concerns these men had with public service. This is not to say they were not interested in social control and power in the public domain; rather, it is to suggest that they saw in science the means to improve the material conditions of people's lives in a time of growing class disparity and great economic change.

Gilman's efforts at Johns Hopkins, for example, solidified the university's high status in medical research, education, and treatment, and fundamentally shaped the profession and its focus. Donald Fleming and Hugh Hawkins argue in their biographies that William Welch, Daniel Coit Gilman, and others who participated in this process also were profoundly motivated by the desire to relieve suffering and pain. Bascom and then Van Hise at Wisconsin developed and maintained close relations with the state to use science to better the lives of Wisconsin's citizens, not merely for their own or their institution's prestige. As Louise Stevenson suggests, Noah Porter at Yale was far more concerned with the ethics of scientific development and application than Bledstein allowed. These cases raise a question about Bledstein's emphasis on career mobility as a motivating factor in the promotion of science as a source of authority among professionals. Was Bledstein critically imposing a late-twentieth-century model of professional academic culture, the competitive, ego-satisfying aspects of some academic science, on all the professions, including the academic profession?¹²

Despite its limitations, Bledstein's book has made a very important contribution to the history of higher education and professions, to American social and cultural history, and to discussions about professionalization. Taken with the work on selective admissions by Marcia Synnott, Harold Wechsler, and Dan Oren, Bledstein's conceptual approach to the history helps to illuminate the university's role in defining, encouraging, and limiting the professional, social, and intellectual aspirations of different groups. David Levine's recent study of higher education and middle-class aspirations demonstrates the power of such a combined examination. Lynn Gordon's analysis of women students' efforts to shape campus culture is evidence of the need to examine student life to understand how colleges and universities did or did not serve students, whatever their aspirations. These historians have moved beyond reliance on administrators' visions and rhetoric to examine not only what happened to students on campuses, but also how students influenced higher educational institutions.¹³

¹² Donald Fleming, *William H. Welch and the Rise of Modern Medicine* (Boston 1954); Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York, 1972); Hugh Hawkins, *Pioneer: A History of the Johns Hopkins University, 1874-1889* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1960); Louise L. Stevenson, *Scholarly Means to Evangelical Ends: The New Haven Scholars and the Transformation of Higher Learning in America, 1830-1890* (Baltimore, 1986).

¹³ Marcia Graham Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900-1970* (Westport, Conn., 1979); Harold S. Wechsler, *The Qualified Student: A History of Selective College Admission in America* (New York,

Works of the past fifteen years focusing on professionalization suggest the ways Bledstein's study advanced the discussion. Magali Larson critically analyzed the cognitive, normative, and evaluative dimensions of professionalism to explore how professionals have tried to establish and control a market for their services and expertise. Eliot Freidson offered a careful and thorough examination of changing definitions of profession and professional roles and, in the more recent period, of how a whole range of institutions contribute to defining and confirming professional status and power. Thomas Haskell and his coauthors investigated the development of specialization, the uses of science, and the roles of institutions in the process. Andrew Abbott also used history to explore changes in professions and in conceptions of professional work. His study situated the development of professions within social and cultural change and analyzed the diversity of professional life in comparative perspective. Taken together, these sociological and historical analyses have significantly increased our understanding of professions. Their historical development, their multiple relationships to higher educational institutions, and their social roles in Western societies have shaped fundamentally how powerful and authoritative they have been.¹⁴

The Culture of Professionalism arrived in the wake of a number of histories about higher education that largely focused on the beneficial services American universities provided in the processes of twentieth-century modernization. Bledstein's major contribution was to raise critical questions about the functions of the university in modern America and the ways it has served some better than others in such services as educating professionals. His criticisms demanded that historians scrutinize more closely the relationships between knowledge and power, authority and expertise. Finally, Bledstein's arguments have moved historians to reexamine the powerful roles institutions played in the formation of social class and in shaping authority relations in a society increasingly reliant on the knowledge industry to sustain its economy, its social life, and its political vitality.

1977); Dan A. Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale* (New Haven, Conn., 1985); Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration*; Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven, Conn., 1990).

¹⁴ Larson, *Rise of Professionalism*; Eliot Freidson, *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalization of Formal Knowledge* (Chicago, 1986); Haskell, ed., *The Authority of Experts*; Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago, 1988).