

University of New Mexico

UNM Digital Repository

History Faculty Publications

Scholarly Communication - Departments

2008

“Professionalization: Overview” & “Professionalization: Europe”

Charles E. McClelland

University of New Mexico, cemcc@unm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist_fsp



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McClelland, Charles E.. "“Professionalization: Overview” & “Professionalization: Europe”." *Peter Stearns (ed.), Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World, 8 Vols., VI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)*. (2008). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist_fsp/6

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Communication - Departments at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

[Drafts of articles “Professionalization: Overview” and “Professionalization: Europe,” later published in Peter Stearns (ed.), *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World*, 8 Vols., VI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).]

by Charles E. McClelland

Professionalization: Overview

Professionalization is the process of applying uniform high standards of expert knowledge and skill to a specific occupation. Traditional pre-modern professions (e.g. clergy, law, medicine, university teaching) were usually distinguished from other occupations by requiring tertiary formal education and equivalent certification, a high degree of social trust and honor, and regulation by high authority (church, state) rather than local guilds or custom. The dissolution or enfeeblement of guilds and deregulation of labor markets in the wake of the French Revolution had consequences in two historical developments within the professional, non-artisan occupations. (1) Older professions tended also to organize to attain more autonomy and self-governing rights, justified by increasing scientific or scholarly knowledge demanded of practitioners, as well as claiming a clear monopoly on services and higher social or economic status. (2) Occupations related to emerging new forms of scientific or scholarly expertise, generated by expanding economies and social innovations such as widespread schooling (e.g. chemistry, engineering, or secondary school teaching) pursued strategies similar to established professions. The relative success of these strategies has also promoted claims by occupational groups with less demanding educational and certification qualifications (“pseudo-professions” such as hairdressing) that they also be treated as professions, or

demands by other groups that tertiary education be required for them, thereby facilitating professional recognition (“semi-professions” such as elementary school teaching).

Different cultural and historical settings produced many variations of professionalization. Attempts to designate some occupations as “professional” while excluding others have often proven fruitless (cf. debates in Anglo-American sociology) because of inherent peculiarities of existing models (e.g. English or American experience). A central issue of contention has been the degree of self-governance and autonomy of professional groups: are those subjected to a professionalization process by state authority mere “bureaucracies”? Since validation by state recognition and regulation has regularly featured in the process almost everywhere, the degree to which a professional group itself can set its own standards – not absolute monopoly over the kinds of services it provides – is a key measure. Extreme examples of reversal of the professionalization process, resulting in debased qualifications or frustration of the free application of high expertise may be called “deprofessionalization” (a frequent process under totalitarian regimes). If the aim of most professional groups is toward a monopoly on providing their kinds of services, then the degree to which they dominate the “market” or are dominated by it (e.g. under conditions of globalizing capitalism) should prove a life-and-death matter for them in future.

I. The social system of generating and administering expert knowledge.

Professionalization implies the social control of complex and essential expert knowledge, ideally in a satisfactory balance among wishes and interests of service-

providing professionals themselves, their clienteles, official regulators and economic forces. Major mechanisms of control in modern times have included the “gatekeeping” functions of admission to and certification of higher specialized education and competence; mechanisms to hold practitioners to accepted standards of practice (e.g. disbarment or license revocation for lawyers or physicians); and the shaping of professional services by extrinsic forces (e.g. medical insurance or mandatory public schooling).

Powerful social forces have frequently arrayed themselves against the autonomous development and exercise of advanced expert knowledge. The rapid enfeeblement of established churches in the wake of the French Revolution and the secularization of many professional functions (such as higher education) undoubtedly advanced professionalization, but the secular state took over many of the same supervisory functions. Insofar as modern professional groups (mostly founded from the middle of the nineteenth century on) were able to persuade governments to grant them high degrees of influence over the professionalization process, one might characterize the period 1850-1970) as the heyday of professional autonomy in North America, Europe and areas influenced by them. The late twentieth century hegemony of “neoliberal” shibboleths such as “deregulation” has effectively posed the latest threat to professionalization by distorting the teachings of Adam Smith and others. Vulgar neoliberalism, by valuing only maximum profit and the amoral exchange of the market, undermines such explicit and tacit professional requirements as altruism, scientific curiosity, ethical codes of behavior, and the transparency and reliability of fields of professional discourse and action.

Other impediments to professionalization include resistance to professional canons by practitioners themselves (ranging from “alternative” methods such as faith healing to outright fraud) and dilution of the public image of professionalism by attempts to extend the concept to minimally-skilled occupations. Significant changes in society such as mass higher education and feminization of previously all-male professions have also blurred the lines between learned occupations and weakened the cohesion within them. In an era of accelerating change in professionally relevant knowledge, the completion of tertiary professional educational qualifications alone no longer stands out strongly as a marker of status and competence. For example, the technologization of medical care has demystified much of the activity and judgment of physicians while increasing the importance and training of nursing personnel (without however erasing differences of status and income). Market globalization has allowed increasing resort to the services of some kinds of professionals in low-wage countries, for example in engineering and science. One of the traditional arguments of professional groups in favor of holding a certain monopoly over services -- altruism and protection of the public welfare-- has also suffered from shortcomings in enforcing professional ethics and the perception that the real purpose of monopoly is to raise incomes.

II. Brief history of professions in the modern world

In the ancient, medieval and non-European worlds, many skilled occupations today known as professions existed in some form, but they were considered to be “arts”

or *tekne* (ancient Greece). It was these to which Hippocrates referred in his famous aphorism, “Art [the craft] is long [to learn] but life short”. The “long” training for such occupations remained in the hands of individual teachers/masters or guilds. The latter functioned as agents of professional control, mostly on a local basis. The organization of teaching into universities beginning in thirteenth-century Europe, the rise of a culture of learnedness affiliated with aristocratic court life of the Renaissance, and a high valuation placed on education by the Protestant Reformation contributed to a social upgrading of those professions whose practice required university-like, i.e. “theoretical” education. At least through the eighteenth century (and in many ways beyond) the required domination of ancient languages and texts, scholarly autonomy from local guild control (but within the sometimes chafing supervision of church hierarchies), and association with theological, legal, medical, and secondary-educational interests of dominant elites guaranteed the “learned” professions a special and elevated place in European society. Even beyond universities, not always welcoming to challenges from the worlds of art or science, the early modern period created “academies” (usually affiliated with expanding monarchies) to reinvigorate and upgrade the fine arts and knowledge of nature. In some societies with weakened guild traditions and limited public authority of churches and states, small populations, or a combination of these (such as Britain and its American colonies), professional training and certification (except for the clergy) had largely developed decoupled from higher educational institutions, which had morphed into predominately undergraduate colleges.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century and in the wake of such major upheavals as the American and French rebellions against royal and oligarchic regulatory

authority, a period of liberalization opened for the professions. Following the direction to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), many governments abolished or weakened guild controls of the market in skilled services. In their place, however, came requirements of education, certification, and practice imposed by the modern state, usually in consonance and cooperation with corporate bodies representing the various professions. By the second half of the century, which witnessed the start of a geometric progression of knowledge relevant to many learned professions, the latter came to be more closely linked with higher education. Universities themselves were moving toward an astonishing rejuvenation and renaissance initiated in Germany by such new and reform-model institutions as the universities of Göttingen (1737) and Berlin (1810), which had proven their value enough by the 1860s and 1870s to inspire adaptation and emulation from New Haven and Baltimore to Paris, St. Petersburg and Tokyo. By the early twentieth century the last remnants of "proprietary" professional schools (e.g. in medicine and law) were under attack in the United States, and the meshing of professional schools attached to or coordinated with public systems of higher education and geared to producing practitioners to standards agreed by independent professional organizations was in place.

Professionalization in the twentieth century was marked by contradictory trends. On the one hand more and more occupations became professionalized (with ever-higher educational and certification requirements, organization into professional associations, inclusion of wider and wider segments of the population affected by professionals as "clients"). On the other, the autonomous application of expert knowledge by professionals was under serious attack by totalitarian governments (e.g. Hitler, Stalin or

Mao) and, where the power of government was constitutionally limited, by huge business corporations. Secular trends opposed to rationality, to authority based on expertise and even to science itself can hardly be said to have diminished, and they also undermine the foundations of professionalism. Although it may be too soon to agree with many observers that the age of professionalism is past, along with the cultivated independent bourgeoisie that largely embodied it in the modern world, it is also difficult to imagine the management of complex social tasks in the future without it. The sociologist Talcott Parsons may have been right to regard “the professional complex” as “the most important single component in the structure of modern societies.” But he may have been overoptimistic in stressing its organizational power compared to the “capitalistic organization of the economy” in a globalizing setting. (Parsons 1968, 545.)

Professionalization: Europe

“Professionalization is an Anglo-American disease,” as some observers have contended. Certainly much of professionalization theory has employed the terms coined to describe English and American experiences of professionalization as if they were universal. In fact, the continental European experience has been mostly a variation on a theme, with the Anglo-American versions converging increasingly with the “European” over time. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, indeed, regulatory homogenization of professional standards and practices for members of the European

Union is pushing such Anglophone members as Ireland and Great Britain into a single “market for professional services.”

I. Continental variants

The two major dimensions on which continental developments differed lay along the lines of educational preparation for and regulation of learned professions. In most continental states, university faculties (theology, law, medicine, philosophy) and -- increasingly from the end of the nineteenth century -- specialized tertiary colleges with university rank (engineering, business, school-teaching, forestry etc.) provided instruction and certification of expert professional knowledge that could be acquired in Britain only through guild-like bodies (e.g. Inns of Court for English law) or independent study and/or proprietary schooling comparable to apprenticeship in the United States. Licensing and regulation of practice were generally supervised more closely by state authorities on the continent, although with concessions to and cooperation with independent professional organizations and pressure groups.

II. Higher education

One of the consequences of the increasingly close linkage between higher educational institutions and professional training in the nineteenth century was the rapid integration of new scientific and scholarly knowledge into professional practice. The rise of the modern “research university,” first in Germany and then by emulation in other

parts of Europe, North America and elsewhere, promoted the injection of scientific and scholarly discovery methods and content into the previously moribund or glacially changing curriculum of professional schools. On the other hand, the localization of a large proportion of active scholars and scientists in universities and their equivalents (a radical breach with previous promotion of non-teaching academies of science) meant that professionalization came to be associated with the dynamic expansion of *new knowledge* rather than merely the instrumentalization of practice-oriented *information*.

The relationship between professions and the societies they served was mediated in different ways, just as each profession (old and emerging) was shaped by the particular area of knowledge and skill required for it. In general the oldest learned profession, that of the clergy, remained the most traditional, developing the lowest degree of autonomy, educational achievement, independent organizations and material rewards (with exceptions in some Protestant countries, where research-university training went beyond the level of seminary curriculum common in Catholic and Orthodox Christian areas). Everywhere excluded from access to educational credentials and professional practice, European Jews also began to enter the learned professions as legal and informal barriers were lowered from the middle of the nineteenth century. The ultimately successful battle of European women's movements to achieve admission of qualified females to higher education and professional practice began to bear fruit shortly before World War I.

Medicine after about 1800 rapidly became both the pacesetter modern profession and a leader toward intermeshing with scientific research, at least until the vigorous expansion of modern physical sciences (e.g. physics, chemistry) as both academic fields and professionalized occupations. The "humanities" (e.g. philosophy, philology, history),

previously treated as propaedeutic subjects, rose in status and scholarly rigor as demand for teachers in expanding secondary education systems increased. Legal studies, being everywhere associated with the ruling class and state authority, long resisted innovative research, but even in this field most heavily favored by the sons of European elites, such new methods as critical historical research and social science analysis slowly altered the requirements for lawyers and judges. Insofar as traditional faculties resisted the introduction of new professional subjects (natural science and engineering were often denounced as “materialistic” or “merely practical” and thus allegedly improper in “world of ideas” represented by ancient universities), they were often bypassed.

Engineering, agronomy, forestry, business, military science, and other “new” professional fields usually rose in status as they came to be taught in new or upgraded post-secondary educational institutions (e.g. polytechnics, military academies and business schools). Indeed one of the characteristic goals of most “new profession” practitioner organizations was the recognition of their status equal to that of traditional university-based professions by the requirement and provision of preparation on a post-secondary level (“raising the profession”). Depending on local and historical circumstances, such specialized schools might arise out of national policy (e.g. French *grandes écoles* or the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology), provincial state initiatives (such as most German *Hochschulen* of all types), local or even private efforts (such as the London School of Economics or German urban business schools). Because the expansion of tertiary professional education happened in Europe in a more haphazard way than under the influence of the Morrill Act (1862) in the United States, traditional (university)

and new professional schools tended to remain independent of each other and are still often so today.

III. Regulation of practice

A higher-education degree or certificate might not be all that was required to be admitted to practice. A period of poorly paid practical experience was usually expected of lawyers, physicians, clergymen, and teachers before full licensing and employment in public or private service. Such practical apprenticeships tended to become longer as a function of the expansion of professional knowledge, overcrowding and competition within the professions. In some sectors of many professions “practice” entailed activities as an individual entrepreneur or in a partnership (e.g. physicians, lawyers, architects, engineers). On the European continent, in contrast to British and American experience, however, large numbers of professionals found employment in a state-regulated service or in private corporations (e.g. panel doctors, judges, civil servants, teachers, engineers and scientists, or economists). The increasing bureaucratization of much professional work (for example, through the establishment of public health-insurance systems) for medical care from the late nineteenth century onward meant that professional fees were set by powerful extra-professional interests (at worst) or by negotiation between these entities and representatives of professional groups (at best).

The self-governance and organization of professions, traditionally provided by guild-like entities before the modern period, evolved in a variety of new ways beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Local and regional societies of practitioners – often

founded with an avowedly scientific, sociable or self-help purpose, normally gave way to national organizations that developed, by the turn of the twentieth century, traits of lobbying and interest-political organizations. Depending on specific locale and profession, these organizations might have to attempt to influence national bureaucracies and parliaments as well as the general public, or respond to more local political and economic actors. In the German Empire, for example, medical and legal practice were strongly influenced by national legislation (Reich Physicians and Lawyers Regulations, national health insurance laws) but also deal with accreditation by the federal states. In countries with more centralized government traditions, such as France, national professional organizations were needed to confront countrywide issues. Increasing specialization produced a tendency to fragmentation among professional groups (with physicians, for example, belonging to organizations for medical specialists or panel doctors in many countries) as well as a nascent trend toward labor-union types of representation within certain professions starting around the time of the First World War. Whereas professional organizations in the USA and to some degree in Britain (notable examples are the American and British Medical Associations) were often able to play a dominant role in shaping the conditions of professional work in accordance with their own agendas, the tradition of strong state bureaucracies in many continental countries limited the complete fulfillment of professionals' desires, particularly in times of economic crisis (as in the interwar period) and oversupply and heightened competition among practitioners.

Disappointment with professional lobbying efforts sometimes led the predominantly bourgeois professional classes into support for authoritarian or fascist

solutions, as happened to a notably high degree among physicians supporting Hitler in 1930s Germany. Indeed, the ideology of early Italian fascism – borrowed from corporatist theoreticians of the first third of the twentieth century – promised (but did not really deliver) public decision-making by “corporations” representing important segments of society including especially the professions.

The opening of higher education to ever-broader socioeconomic classes, begun in the period well before World War I with religious minorities (especially Jews) and later women continued, but with some serious setbacks. In the Soviet bloc access was even extended to children of workers and peasants (and often denied to the middle class) Acceleration of access after the 1960s, as well as the spread of professional standards to ever more forms of occupations has had complex and sometimes conflicting effects on the power of professional groups to dominate the conditions of practice and the agendas of their fields as well as their relatively high social standing. On the one hand never before has such a large proportion of Europeans worked in learned professions as today. Twentieth-century attempts to subject and co-opt professionals in authoritarian regimes (Nazi, Soviet etc.) have largely failed, and the long-term objectives of professionals as expressed by their representative national and now European Union-side organizations have been satisfied to a high degree. On the other hand, the fragmentation and unwieldy size of the professional orders today reduces their ability to maintain their control of their own occupational standards.