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**Professions and  
Professional Ideologies  
in America**

Edited by

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# 1 Introduction

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In 1968, in a synoptic essay on "professions" for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, the influential American sociologist Talcott Parsons left his readers in no doubt about the importance of his subject. The "professional complex," he wrote,

has already become the most important single component in the structure of modern societies. It has displaced first the 'state,' in the relatively early modern sense of that term, and, more recently, the 'capitalistic' organization of the economy. The massive emergence of the professional complex, not the special status of capitalistic or socialistic modes of organization, is the crucial structural development in twentieth-century society.<sup>1</sup>

For Parsons, moreover, professions and professionals seemed to defy the usual conflict-laden categories of social analysis. Professionals were neither capitalists nor workers, neither peasants nor proprietors, nor were they even (except occasionally) government bureaucrats. The advance guard of the professional movement was to be found instead among academics. In Parsons's view, the professions and the research university were tightly linked, and their arm-in-arm march toward ever-increasing rationalization and efficiency was the most striking feature of modern life.<sup>2</sup>

Parsons's vision of the professions was widely shared at the time by other American academics. For most of this "American century," in fact, most Americans have looked upon the professions as a centrally important, increasingly effective, and basically apolitical component in modern society. Precisely because the professions have been so widely perceived as occupations of special value and importance, the scholarly literature about them has often reflected a concern with "gate-keeping." There have been repeated attempts to specify a set of distinctively professional attributes and to assess the extent to which this or that occupational group approached or diverged from the ideal type. At least since 1915, when Abraham Flexner produced his

famous essay "Is Social Work a Profession?"<sup>3</sup> considerable energy has been invested in efforts to legislate the meaning and boundaries of the term itself. This long-standing tradition took on a special vitality and urgency as the "credentialed society" became ever more visible in the wake of World War II.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, American scholars reached a striking degree of consensus about the distinctive features of professions and professionals. As codified by Parsons in his essay of 1968, the characteristic features of a profession are (1) formal technical training, including especially an intellectual component, in an institutional setting that certifies quality and competence; (2) demonstrable skills in the pragmatic application of this formal training; and (3) institutional mechanisms to ensure that this competence and skill will be used in a socially responsible way.<sup>5</sup> These or very similar criteria stood at the core of a fairly coherent and widely accepted model of the professions. If sociologists were the chief architects of this model, historians proved more than ready to follow their lead. The history of the professions—insofar as it attracted interest at all—usually took the form of narrative accounts of the process by which this or that occupational group gradually acquired the full set of attributes that gave it legitimate claim to the status of a profession. The acceptance of a discipline or an activity within the university curriculum was often seen as the crucial stage in this process.<sup>6</sup> For the most part, professionalization was portrayed as a beneficial and virtually inevitable part of an increasingly complex and interdependent world.<sup>7</sup>

During the past decade or so, this way of looking at the professions has been subjected to increasingly critical scrutiny—sometimes, indeed, to vitriolic attack. Benign and "attributional" models of the professions have lost some of their appeal, among both academics and the wider public. Examples of demonstrable corruption or ineptitude on the part of some certified professionals have become more widely publicized. There has been a growing outcry against the alleged "tyranny of the experts."<sup>8</sup> The link between universities and "true" professions has become increasingly less clear as the university curriculum (especially in its "pluralistic" American form) has come to embrace virtually every form of vocational training. In the sociological literature, more nearly natural classifications of occupational groups are now being sought through ethnographic investigations of the richly ambiguous ways in which words like "profession" and "professional" are used by real people and real collectivities in real life.<sup>9</sup> And closer attention to the actual behavior and structure of professional groups has revealed the extent to which superficial similarities and harmonies can conceal

important differences and conflicts underneath. What once looked like relatively passive, static, and homogeneous "communities of the competent" are increasingly perceived as segmented, hierarchical populations in flux and struggle.

Recent work in the history and historical sociology of the professions both reflects and reinforces this change of view. It is now less common to begin with the assumption that past professionals acted in a socially responsible way. It is now less common to assume in advance that past professional groups actually possessed the cognitive superiority and instrumental efficacy they claimed for themselves. And it is now less common to presume that there is some inevitable and automatically beneficial connection between professionalization and "progress." Increasing attention is being paid instead to some of the less edifying features of professional behavior—to the efforts of professional groups to enlarge their power, income, and status through monopolistic practices; to the sometimes bitter struggles between competing professions or between upper and lower branches of the same profession; and to the role that professions can play in legitimizing social stratification, economic disparities, and mechanisms of social control.<sup>10</sup>

Much has been gained from this shift of perspective and widening of concerns. Yet the resulting literature is sometimes strident or conspiratorial in tone and too sweepingly critical of Parsons and Parsonians. Despite its limitations, the Parsonian conception of the professions does have value and utility in certain contexts, especially when its categories are deployed as heuristic devices rather than as central elements in a rigid and universal model of the professions.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the "anti-Parsonian" literature itself often deploys Parsonian categories, if only to deny that professions and professionals actually conform to the model.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in the course of rejecting Parsonian teleology, the critics often merely substitute one of their own. If the history of the professions was once dominated by a concern with the process by which occupational groups achieved the attributes of a "true" profession, much of the recent literature also assumes that the professions were headed somewhere from the outset. Particularly striking is the tendency to assume that the professions, which in their primitive or "traditional" form merely dispensed personal services to elite patrons, were destined to be swept upward on the escalator of "modernization" or industrial and corporate capitalism toward the current situation in which the "ideal-typical" professional is an employed servant of the state or a corporation.<sup>13</sup>

The most obvious objection to models that link professionalization with capitalism is that they leave us so deeply in the dark about the

nature of the process in socialist or communist societies—one of the woefully neglected topics in the literature on the professions. But there are also reasons to doubt the universal applicability of such models in the case of capitalist societies themselves. Even Magali Larson—whose systematic, sophisticated, and often illuminating analysis emphasizes the general connection between professionalization and capitalism—nonetheless admits the need to exclude the clergy and the military from her account because these two traditional professions “do not transact their services on the market.”<sup>14</sup> She further concedes that the distribution of personal services by self-employed lawyers and physicians, even in the United States today, involves “traditional” markets and “unproductive labor” having relatively little connection with the capitalist mode of production. Nor does she insist on the universal applicability of her model in the case of other occupational groups. She explicitly acknowledges that her focus on recent Anglo-American developments is a “restrictive” one and that her analysis of professionalization can “in no way be generalized.”<sup>15</sup>

There is, in fact, good reason to suspect that all of the existing models of professions and professionalization are inadequate to some degree and in some respects. Whether they conceive of professionalization as the emergence of benign, apolitical, “non-economic,” and homogeneous “communities of the competent,” or whether they see it as a conspiratorial, stratifying, and exploitative process in tune with the needs of capitalism, the existing models are simply unable to account for the richly diverse forms and distribution of professional groups as we meet them in actual historical experience.

That conclusion is apparent, if by no means always explicit, in the four essays gathered together in this volume. This shared skepticism toward existing models is particularly noteworthy in a collection of essays on American professions. Historians who specialize in other countries, especially in pre-industrial Europe, have already complained that both “Parsonian” and “capitalist” models of the professions are artifacts of the attention thus far lavished on late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-American developments.<sup>16</sup> By suggesting that both models are inadequate even in the American context, this collection of essays makes it clear just how much work needs to be done before a reasonably satisfying general theory of professions and professionalization can be constructed.

Given the direction of recent scholarship in the field, it will come as no surprise that the contributors to this volume find little appeal in the benign Parsonian conception of professions. What is perhaps more surprising is their reluctance to embrace the alternative “capitalist”

model, especially those versions of it that embody George Bernard Shaw's famous definition of the professions as “a conspiracy against laymen.” Without denying that professional groups try to constitute and control (that is, to monopolize) the market for their specialized services, these essays go beyond much of the recent literature by acknowledging that the public (or the laity) also plays a crucial role in the success of professional market strategies. The contributors recognize the limits of independent professional power and perceive the need to take account of the *demand* for professional services as well as the willingness of the public (or at least their elected representatives) to grant special status and privileges to specific occupational groups. Indeed, the contributors might even concede the quasi-Parsonian point that “something in the nature of things” helps to account for some part of professional power.<sup>17</sup>

But these four essays also share a still more specific and original theme. More or less explicitly, all four essays focus on professional “ideology” and “rhetoric” in the American context. What is particularly striking is the unity of their approach to this common theme. While they by no means adopt the ideologies purveyed by their historical actors, the contributors manage to avoid the current fashion for dismissing professional claims as mere self-serving verbiage—as deliberately deceitful smoke screens behind which professional groups can comfortably pursue their monopolistic goals. In these essays, unlike so much of the recent literature, there is a recognition that professionals have usually constructed their ideologies unself-consciously and sincerely, that whatever deception may be embodied in professional ideology and rhetoric is partly a matter of self-deception as well. Even in the case of the medical profession, which has been the focus of so much critical scholarship of late, there is evidence to suggest that many American physicians have genuinely believed in the extreme laissez-faire ideology that organized medicine has so long exploited in its efforts to avoid government “interference.” Without accepting that ideology—indeed, it would be easy to mount a case that American physicians have been protected rather than threatened by their government—it is important to appreciate how fully the ideology has pervaded the profession.<sup>18</sup> In the four essays below, we are invited to consider that point in the case of other professions in the American context. More than that, we are asked to take seriously the actual *content* of professional ideologies. In doing so, we will be able to see the extent to which such ideologies reflect larger themes in American culture. And we will also be able to see that the history of the professions, like so much else in the historical experience of elites, makes

vastly better sense when we try to forge strong and meaningful links between social and intellectual (or cultural) history.

In the opening essay, Donald M. Scott provides the only example known to me of a historical study of professional "failure." His analysis of a "profession that vanished"—public lecturing in mid-nineteenth-century America—stands alone in a body of literature replete with stories of successful "professional projects."<sup>19</sup> Of the essays in this volume, Scott's is also the most explicit in its treatment of existing models or conceptions of professions. He uses his study of public lecturing to argue that the meaning of "profession" is a sociocultural construct whose contours are constantly shifting in response to changing perceptions of the nature and role of particular occupational groups. According to Scott, public lecturing was fashioned into a career in the 1830s and 1840s by restless middle-class hustlers or even genteel young men who wanted to make their way in the world through possession and dissemination of knowledge but who found the conventional learned professions too crowded or too restrictive in the social role such occupations allowed them to play. Their improvised careers were made possible by an expanding demand for "useful knowledge" on the part of a public willing and able to pay for it. Between the late 1840s and 1870s, says Scott, public lecturing was transformed from a career into a profession when a fully developed public lecture system conferred authority and legitimacy on a group of itinerant speakers whose perceived role resembled that played by the clergy in eighteenth-century America. Although the activity of public lecturing has survived ever since, Scott argues that it ceased to be seen as a separate profession in any meaningful sense after about 1870. As the modern research university emerged and spread throughout the United States, the cognitive map was restructured in such a way that fields of knowledge became increasingly institutionalized into separate academic disciplines. Simultaneously, broadly literate cultural spokespersonship—the social role filled by the public lecturers—was largely replaced by academic scholarship, and the broad public audience for intellectual products gave way before specialized "communities of the competent."

Patricia U. Bonomi's essay explores the effects of the Great Awakening of the late 1730s and early 1740s on the professional image and standing of the Presbyterian clergy in the middle American colonies. She shows that internecine squabbles between "Old Sides" and "New Sides" (or revivalist) ministers demystified the Presbyterian clergy in the eyes of their congregations and more generally threatened clerical authority in Presbyterian communities. Lay men and women were emboldened to take independent positions in the face of pitched and

public battles between Old Sides and New Sides ministers over such traditionally "professional" issues as clerical education, procedures for ordination, itinerant preaching, clerical discipline, and the proper division of authority among ministers, presbytery, and synod. Many worshippers were attracted by the evangelical fervor and semipopulist rhetoric of the New Sides ministers, who could then choose to break away from the institutional structures dominated by their Old Sides adversaries. Besides creating dissident presbyteries and synods, the New Sides ministers established innovative educational institutions and standards for ordination that allowed Presbyterian ministers to be trained outside the Old World universities or their New World counterparts, Harvard and Yale. There was, for a time, an open schism in the Presbyterian church. But ministers from both sides soon came to see that their continued public wrangling threatened to bring on a complete disintegration of clerical authority at a time when Presbyterians faced rising competition from more enthusiastically revivalist preachers and sects. Presbyterian ministers then sought to reclaim part of their authority and community standing by diverting some of their energy to secular functions, for example, making their churches centers of political action and military recruitment, especially on the frontier. At the same time, in the increasingly separate professional sphere, New Sides and Old Sides ministers moved gradually toward a reconciliation—finally achieved in 1758—in which the authority of church institutions and ministers was formally reaffirmed, even at the expense of losing many worshippers to more "democratic" or less structured denominations. By then, the once young and rebellious New Sides ministers had come to see the virtues of making common professional cause with their Old Sides brethren.

Stephen Botein's essay examines the exalted vision of judgeship that American lawyers have long held and purveyed as part of their construction of a professional ideology and rhetoric. Often using religious language and metaphor, the legal elite early portrayed judicial office as a fitting conclusion to a career of exceptional professional accomplishment and as a calling free from any debasing association with the world of daily affairs and entrepreneurial self-interest. This ideal—as the lawyers themselves recognized—was rarely approached in reality, for American judges usually won their office on the basis of social and political criteria rather than "professional" attainment. Yet the ideal of an unsullied and intellectually distinguished office at the top of the professional hierarchy served as a compelling and transforming symbol in the image the American legal elite could form of itself. It could also be a potent force in public relations. Twice in this century, the Ameri-

can Bar Association undertook major campaigns against efforts to "debase" the office of judgeship. In the 1910s, ABA spokesmen fulminated against the threat of the small but growing movement for "judicial recall," which would have made judges subject to periodic reexamination by the electorate. In 1937, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt launched a notorious effort to "pack" the Supreme Court with his appointees, the ABA leadership was again outraged at such explicit political interference with the bench. Although rank-and-file lawyers were distinctly less unified than the ABA leadership on both issues, especially on Roosevelt's "court-packing," the ABA could claim to have defeated both of these threats to the professional integrity of judicial office. In an arguably irrational but surprisingly effective way, the transforming ideal of judgeship could even be extended to bestow a sense of dignity and professional tone on practitioners at the very lowest rungs of the legal ladder. If judgeship could be seen as a fitting and sublime capstone to a distinguished career, it was also a goal to which any American lawyer might aspire even in the midst of his usually mundane activities in the everyday world of American law.

In the closing essay, Robert W. Gordon offers an extended critique of prevailing approaches to American legal history and makes a preliminary case for an alternative model of his own. Above all, Gordon insists that historians must begin to pay proper attention to the relation between legal thought and legal practice. He joins other recent scholars by objecting to the body of literature that treats the history of legal doctrine as a species of pure intellectual history—as a strictly logical unfolding of disembodied ideas, elaborated in splendid isolation from the tumult of everyday affairs. But he also emphasizes the need to take the content of legal doctrine seriously, and most of his critical commentary is directed against the now fashionable tendency to dismiss legal thought as an inherently uninteresting "technological" response to new socioeconomic problems or as a trivially obvious expression of interest-group (or class) politics. Gordon concedes that such approaches do go part way toward explaining American legal history, but he stresses how incomplete they look when tested closely against particular cases or even long-term structural changes. His intellectual tour through three distinct ideologies of "legal science" in nineteenth-century America—the antebellum "Whig-Federalist" version, the Liberal version, and the Progressive version—suggests that these ideologies can be seen as the sometimes curious products of genuine efforts by elite lawyers to mediate between the realms of thought and action within "a traditional but continually self-renewing and self-transforming framework of justice" (p. 81). On this view, the elite lawyers were

bound together less by shared economic interests and political beliefs than by their membership in a community of intellectual discourse and professional consciousness. Such a conception of legal "ideology" would, at the least, help us to comprehend the fact that American lawyers and judges have sometimes fashioned legal doctrines and instruments that turned out to be detrimental to their own immediate economic and political interests, or even those of their class and clients. In keeping with his central historiographic theme, Gordon ends by discussing two examples of the way in which Liberal legal doctrine was applied in practice—briefly in the case of the drafting of corporate charters and extensively in the case of the legal reorganization of troubled corporations, especially railroad companies. He argues that the Liberal version of rights definition, as elaborated through the ideological activities of practicing lawyers, sometimes worked against the needs of corporate capitalism and paved the way for the triumph of the Progressive version of legal science at the turn of the century. Conceding that we do not yet know whether or how far these two cases are typical, Gordon nonetheless presents them as examples of the potential fertility of applying his approach to other episodes in the history of American law.

This skeletal summary of the essays that follow cannot hope to do justice to their richness and interest. It seeks only to convey some sense of the freshness of their broadly similar approach toward a unified set of themes. Taken as a whole, the essays suggest that Parsons exaggerated the importance of the professions in modern society—or, more precisely, exaggerated the independence of the process of professionalization from larger social, economic, political, and cultural forces. The contributors to this volume would surely agree that professionalization is a dependent variable subject to these more powerful forces. They would probably also agree that the history of the professions is but one chapter in the history of social stratification in general and of elites in particular. But perhaps the history of elites and elite culture is ripe for renewed attention in the light of the recent efflorescence of "history from the bottom up." Important insights into popular beliefs (or whatever other impoverished translation one gives to *mentalités*) have resulted from this branch of the "new history." What this collection of essays suggests is that our understanding of professional elites will also benefit from systematic and empathetic efforts to penetrate the ways in which they, too, tried to make sense of the world around them.