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THE CHANGING NATURE OF PROFESSIONAL CONTROL

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Abstract

The traditional view of the professions is that they are largely free of the hierarchical forms of social control characteristic of other kinds of occupations; instead, they are self-regulating, subject only to informal collegial control. As a result of events in the past few decades in the United States, analysts now believe that the traditional autonomy of professions is eroding. This paper reviews two theories that emphasize this process, one focusing on deprofessionalization and the other on proletarianization. It concludes that the available evidence does not support either theory sufficiently to make them analytically useful; it advances an alternate theory that emphasizes the formalization of professional social control. This third viewpoint is based on the finding that the professions—as corporate bodies—have remained relatively autonomous. Antitrust decisions, political pressure to exercise more control over errant members, and the administrative requirement of greater accountability in large organizations employing professionals are all leading to a formalization of the methods by which professions control their members. An administrative elite of professionals who serve as supervisors, managers, chief executive officers, and owners is being formed in order to guide and evaluate the performance of rank and file professionals. The technical standards employed by such professionally qualified administrators are devised by a separate group of professionals—the knowledge elite—who are based primarily in professional schools. Rank and file practitioners are no longer as free to follow the dictates of their individual judgments as in the past, though quite unlike other workers, their work is expected to involve the use of discretion on a daily basis. Stratification in the professions, which has always existed, has become more formal and overt than in the past. This development may lead to divisions within any given

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profession as a whole that are too deep to contain within a nominally unified corporate body.

INTRODUCTION

The professions have long occupied a special position in sociology. Nominally, they are productive trades—like butchers, bakers, and electricians—and are part of the social division of labor. But professionals have always been treated as more than merely specialized workers. Since Herbert Spencer's work (1896) or before, the professions have been singled out as occupations that perform tasks of great social value because professionals possess both knowledge and skills that in some way set them apart from other kinds of workers. It has also been thought that professionals are distinctive because they bring a special attitude of commitment and concern to their work, leading R. H. Tawney (1920:91–128) to urge the cultivation of "professionalism" as a means of reorganizing and reorienting the conduct of those engaged in industrial pursuits.

According to many sociologists, the professions are also subject to a self-regulating form of social control that has not been typical of most occupations in modern times—i.e. a middle-class version of worker self-management prevails. Apart from the entrepreneurial businessman, whose work is presumably subject to control by the invisible hand of the capitalist marketplace, most workers perform their jobs in industrial and commercial settings where social control is exercised formally by employers and their representatives and informally by fellow employees during the course of everyday work. Furthermore, the work they do is formulated and evaluated by their managerial superordinates. Professionals, on the other hand, have been represented as independent of significant formal control by nonprofessionals and responsible largely to their own professional associations and to fellow professionals. The courts can exercise control over professional behavior after the fact, of course, when civil suits are brought against individual practitioners for negligence or malpractice. Nevertheless, the emphasis in the traditional sociological literature has been on the self-governing character of the professions. Indeed, the Webbs (1917) assessed the professions in depth, searching for a model of worker self-governance (or producer cooperatives) that might provide a viable alternative to the more hierarchical practices they considered typical of capitalism.

Traditional professional self-regulation is exercised on a formal level by the professional association, which can discipline its members by threatening expulsion from its ranks and loss of the associated privileges. But as Carr-Saunders & Wilson (1933:395–96) correctly observed, formal expulsion or discipline of any sort has been rare. "Of more importance to the social control of the professional is the silent pressure of opinion and tradition . . . which is

constantly around him throughout his professional career" (Carr-Saunders & Wilson 1933:403). Parsons, too, noted professionals' characteristic reliance on informal controls. Like Carr-Saunders & Wilson, he explained it as a result of their need to avoid the imposition of a rigid orthodoxy of norms on what should be a creative, even risk-taking, exercise of refined judgment (Parsons 1951:470–71). Barber (1962:195) characterized the professions as a company of equals which lacks a formal hierarchy and command that "issues detailed directives and enforces rigid control" and whose members are controlled by conscience.

Over the past 20 years, however, there has been increasing evidence that this characteristic depiction of social control within the professions has become too far removed from reality to be useful even as an ideal type. Not only have observers been concerned that organized professional associations have flouted the public interest (e.g. Gilb 1966; Lieberman 1970), but it has become evident that the informal method of social control prevalent among professionals has typically been guided by norms that prevent that control from being exercised judiciously and systematically (Freidson 1970, 1980).

In addition to this evidence, which has emerged from a critical examination of the empirical process by which professionals purport to exercise controls over deviant performance, a number of political and economic events have occurred that imply that new forms of social control are developing. Organizations where professionals work—universities, law firms, social agencies, hospitals and accounting firms, for example—have become larger and more complex, thus changing at least some working conditions. From the 1960s on, scandals have tainted the public image of scientific research, medical research and practice, legal practice, and judicial neutrality. For a time, the number of malpractice suits against physicians and lawyers increased markedly, and various kinds of government regulation have been imposed in some areas of professional work. Meanwhile, several types of legal action have been taken to prevent the professions from engaging in self-interested efforts to protect themselves from competition. The emphasis in sociological writing has therefore shifted from analyzing the professions' special knowledge and ethicality—as revealed in the process of professional education, for example—to examining their concern with establishing and maintaining a specially favored market position (Larson 1977) and investigating their relationship to the power of the state, patrons, and clients (Johnson 1972). A new theme has also emerged, namely, that professionals have become subject to forms of social control that erode their very status as professionals.

In this paper I shall attempt to assess contemporary modes of exercising social control over professionals in the United States. The basic question is whether the changes that have taken place have transformed the position of professions in the political economy in general and in the workplace in particu-

lar to one considerably less distinctive than that prevailing when traditional sociological conceptions of the professions were formulated. Some contemporary writers claim that the professions have lost so much of their power that they have become subject to the same formal, hierarchical, lay controls as other occupations. Let us examine their arguments.

THEORIES OF CHANGING PROFESSIONAL STATUS

While there are no fully articulated, formal theories that address this issue, it is useful to examine two overlapping approaches—the theses of deprofessionalization and of proletarianization. Proponents of both argue that the professional's status in the United States has changed markedly and that the social control exerted over him or her has also been transformed.

The deprofessionalization thesis, which is associated most closely with the work of Marie R. Haug (1973, 1975, 1977), is fairly pragmatic. Essentially, the argument is that the professions are losing their position of prestige and trust. Haug emphasizes several attributes which, taken as a whole, she thinks have accounted for that prestige and respect in the past—e.g. possessing a monopoly over a body of knowledge that is relatively inaccessible to lay people; having a positive public image that stresses altruistic rather than self-serving motives; and having "the power to set their own rules as to what constitutes satisfactory work" (Haug 1973:196). Haug argues that these characteristics are disappearing, and as a consequence, the special prestige and authority enjoyed by the professions is eroding. Becoming mere secular experts, professionals are no longer protected from the necessity of negotiating and compromising with a skeptical clientele, and they are losing their jurisdictional monopoly over a defined area of knowledge and a given set of tasks.

Threats to the professions' monopoly over defined bodies of complex knowledge and skill stem from a number of sources. Insofar as their formal knowledge can be stored in a computer, it loses its esoteric character because anyone can retrieve it. The computer, furthermore, can be used to assess professional performance according to the authoritative standards stored within it. Another threat to the professions' monopoly over specialized knowledge stems from the lay population's increasing levels of education, which makes people less inclined to see this knowledge as mysterious and more likely to be critical and challenging in their dealings with professionals. Finally, the increased complexity of the specialized division of labor within which professionals work makes them dependent on other specialists in new fields who claim authority for themselves and contest control over some portion of the formal knowledge and skill that the established professions formerly monopolized.

The experiential knowledge of the personal service professions, which allowed their members to claim authority on the basis of more comprehensive

experience than any single lay person seeking help for individual problems could possibly have amassed, is similarly threatened. These threats arise from an increase in consumers' formal education, but more importantly, from the rise of special consumer self-help groups and of "indigenous" or lower-level paraprofessional workers. In the case of consumer groups, the women's movement and associated women's health care groups are especially prominent, but many self-help groups concerned with particular diseases, disabilities, and other problems are also important. Insofar as the members of such groups exchange information and experience with each other, they can claim an extensive experiential knowledge that rivals the professional's.

The effects of these challenges to the professions' monopoly of a specific body of knowledge and skills are central to Haug's analysis. In discussing professionals' alleged altruism, she points out how much publicity has been given to the disproportionate increase in physicians' incomes after the passage of legislation that paid many patients' bills with public funds and how the climate of opinion has become increasingly hostile. These changes create greater demands for accountability and for the protection of client's rights, which at once reflect the professions' loss of the trust and prestige they once enjoyed and contribute to this trend. Thus, all of those factors that bolstered the professions' autonomy and enabled them to set their own rules may soon disappear. "In a time when 'professionals' offer only expert information, with the client in a position to seek alternatives, we will begin to see a consumer model, rather than a patient or client model, of the entire transaction and the concept of profession as now formulated will be indeed obsolete" (Haug 1977:226).

The key to Haug's position lies in her emphasis on the consumer and her relative lack of emphasis on work. The proletarianization thesis emphasizes the circumstances of professional work in large organizations. This thesis stems from Marx's theory of history, in which he asserts that over time the intrinsic characteristics of capitalism will reduce virtually all workers to the status of the proletariat, i.e. dependent on selling their labor in order to survive and stripped of all control over the substance and process of their work. Wage labor, or employment rather than self-employment, is the common denominator of proletarian status. As Braverman put it, "the formal definition of the working class is that class which, possessing nothing but its power to labor, sells that labor to capital in return for its subsistence" (Braverman 1974:378). In contrast, Oppenheimer (1973:213–14) describes self-employment as a position in which "the source of income is a more individually-regulated sale of a product or a service under fairly loose market conditions established by face-to-face bargaining, rather than the sale of labor time (in advance of the creation of anything); and where the whole income goes directly to the worker without any bureaucratic intermediary except perhaps an agent (as in the case of an artist)."

Therefore, professionals who come to be employed are proletarianized (cf Esland 1980:229–32).

But there is more to it than that. Employment is an important factor because it implies losing the capacity to control the terms of work. At its foundation is the issue of power or control, and there is more to control than merely setting the economic terms of work. There is also the question of being able to determine what work is to be done, how the work is to be done, and what its aim is to be. Thus, in the case of professionally trained workers, Aronowitz asserts that "they neither control the production process, whose object, specifications and methods are determined from above, nor their own work, which is defined rigidly within the occupational hierarchy" (1974:305). What is being emphasized is not the mere fact of employment, but rather the consequences of working in a large organization where tasks are assigned rationally and ordered by hierarchical supervision—in short, in a bureaucracy. As Oppenheimer put it:

> The bureaucratized workplace . . . tend[s] to replace in the professionals' own workplace factory-like conditions—there are fixed jurisdictions, ordered by rules established by others; there is a hierarchical command system; jobs are entered and mobility exists on the basis of performance in uniform tasks, examinations, or the achievement of certification or 'degrees'; work tends to become specialized, hence extensive division of labor develops. . . .The gap between what the worker does, and an end product, increases (1973:214).

Presumably, professionals are no longer able to govern themselves by their own informal methods of using peer influence and exercising the powers of their associations; instead, they are controlled by others. Echoing Haug, Oppenheimer points to the imposition of new administrative measures aimed at greater professional accountability and notes the pressures stemming from clients' demands for better services.

APPRAISING THE DEPROFESSIONALIZATION THESIS

While there is no logical reason for this, Haug's deprofessionalization thesis stresses cultural and political, more than economic and organizational, phenomena. Indeed, Haug seems to highlight the cultural and political events of the 1960s and early 1970s and assume that they would persist and even intensify in the future. But many of these movements have simply collapsed; others have become so conventional that they are barely recognizable; and still others, if they have not disappeared entirely, have at least become considerably attenuated and altered by countermovements.

Proponents of the deprofessionalization thesis singled out events that seem particularly vulnerable to the effects of historical changes. An emphasis on the strength of the consumers' movement—most particularly of self-help groups and consumer-oriented segments of the women's movement—is central to the

thesis. But community and self-help groups have a high mortality rate and often a highly transient group of participants. Apart from formally organized groups run by "program professionals," the consumer movement today is much less strong than it was in the early 1970s. Furthermore, while hostility to (or at least a suspicion of) professionals' motives continues to exist in the United States, it is diffuse and far weaker than that directed against others. The existing evidence shows that the public is much more dubious about the motives of politicians, "big business," trade unions, and others. Lipset and Schneider's (1983) careful analysis of a variety of surveys taken over decades documents an overall decline in confidence, but public trust in medical, educational, and other professional institutions has dropped comparatively little. Nor is there any evidence that their relative prestige has declined.

It is true that a series of important legal and legislative events have occurred over the past five years that have weakened the professions' capacity to protect themselves from competition. A number of recent Supreme Court decisions have effectively prohibited professional customs aimed at fixing prices and otherwise preventing price competition among colleagues and have held professional associations responsible for the actions of their constituent committees. Nonetheless, there has been no perceptible movement toward actually eliminating the quasi-monopolies or cartels provided by licensing, accreditation, and registration practices, nor any inclination to interfere with the professions' exercise of authority over their own technical areas of expertise (cf. Kissam 1980).

Similarly, while all professions have, over the years, ceded control over certain areas of work to erstwhile competitors or subordinates, there is no noticeable trend toward a steadily shrinking jurisdiction. In the prominent case of medicine—a profession which has been confronted by a bewildering variety of challenges over the decades—there is little evidence that physicians are even close to running out of work. Indeed, if anything, continual new advances in technique make even more medical work possible in areas that were previously dealt with far more simply.

It is in such a context that we must evaluate whether or not the "knowledge gap" has narrowed. Even if the public has more formal education than in the past, it is either a general education or, when it is specialized, it is spread across many different fields. The average consumer is capable of evaluating much more specialized technical information today than was the case yesterday, but as this capability has grown, the quantity and quality of specialized knowledge has also increased. While today's lay clients can be the informed, critical consumers of the services of *yesterday*'s professionals much more easily than in the past, it is an entirely open question whether they can effectively play such a role when dealing with the services of *today*'s professionals, whose knowledge and technical competence have continued to expand.

The professions thus continue to possess a monopoly over at least some important segment of formal knowledge that does not shrink over time, even though both competitors and rising levels of lay knowledge may nibble away at its edges. New knowledge is constantly acquired that takes the place of what has been lost and thereby maintains the knowledge gap. Similarly, while the power of computer technology in storing codified knowledge cannot be ignored, it is the members of each profession who determine what is to be stored and how it is to be done, and who are equipped to interpret and employ what is retrieved effectively. With a continual knowledge gap, potentially universal access to stored data is meaningless. In sum, while the events highlighted by proponents of the deprofessionalization thesis are important, the argument that members of the professions are losing their relative prestige and respect, their special expertise, or their monopoly over the exercise of that expertise over time is not persuasive.

APPRAISING THE PROLETARIANIZATION THESIS

As I have already noted, proponents of the proletarianization thesis emphasize economic and organizational factors, the most elementary of which is the worker's status in the labor market. Like both conservative (Lewis & Maude 1952) and liberal (Marshall 1939) writers, supporters of this thesis assert that the long-term trend is for professionals to be employed, rather than self-employed (cf. Johnson 1973:131–32). Like artisans and yeomen before them, it is argued that this trend reflects a process of proletarianization, since being employed by other people diminishes one's capacity for independent, autonomous work.

In order to assess the validity of this proposition, two questions must be answered. First, is there such a trend away from self-employment both for individual professionals and for professions as a whole (i.e. has the number of professions characterized by self-employment declined?). There is no evidence that either trend is occurring in the United States. While the proportion of self-employed workers in the U.S. labor force as a whole has declined considerably during the twentieth century, this statistic reflects the declining number of people working in agriculture. If one examines the statistics for all nonagricultural workers, one notes that the proportion of self-employed has been extraordinarily stable over this period, save for a temporary increase during three decades during and after World War II (cf. Tausky 1978:2). The overall stability masks changes in the employment status of certain groups, for during this century there has been "a pronounced *rise* in the number of [self-employed] professionals and salesworkers and a corresponding *decline* in the number of proprietors" (Bregger 1963:37, italics added; see also Ray 1975:49 and DiCesare 1975:23–24).

There is thus ground for doubting that a decline in de facto self-employment by professionals has occurred, and it is possible that there has actually been an increase in self-employment. Whatever the trend for the aggregate of *professionals,* however, there is no doubt that the number of *professions* characterized by self-employment has not declined. In fact, employment has typified most professions since their invention, so that a trend *toward* employment is impossible to observe (cf. Kornhauser 1962:4). Looking at the traditional professions—medicine, law, the military, the clergy, and (connected with the clergy historically) university teaching—we see that three of the five never involved self-employment, though professionals in these fields did not necessarily enter into a wage contract. Instead, they operated with the understanding that they could obtain an income from collecting bribes, loot, tithes, rents, student fees, etc. When we examine the occupations assigned to the modern professional-technical category, we see that members of the overwhelming majority of the newer professions have also been typically employed, rather than self-employed. It is true that there is a growing trend toward the employment of the members of two traditional professions that were mostly characterized by self-employment in the past—lawyers (but not judges) and doctors—and of members of the older professions of dentistry and architecture. The norm for professionals, however, has always been employment.

The second question to be addressed is whether employment status bears a reasonably close relationship to economic autonomy. The answer to this question is also negative. When we examine the conditions surrounding self-employment in actual historical circumstances, it is impossible to argue that the self-employed enjoy greater economic security, higher economic rewards, and more autonomy at work than the employed. Owning property or the means of production, whether it is a professional practice or a shop, is not important in and of itself in assuring control over one's economic fate and autonomy in one's work. Surely the more critical matter is one's relationship to the market, capitalist or otherwise. If one's goods or services are so highly valued on the market that consumers are clamoring for access to them, then one can exercise considerable control over the terms, conditions, content, and goals of one's work. But if one's goods or services are not in heavy demand, then one will be confronted by indifferent consumers and at best will live "a life of dignified starvation," as a medical journal characterized the economic condition of two thirds of the physicians in New York City in 1889 (Shryock 1947:116). Whether one is employed or self-employed is beside the point. Given a strong position in the market, one can be employed and "write one's own ticket" nonetheless.

Overall, then, employment status is not a good, direct measure of control or lack of control over one's work. The prime argument of the proletarianization thesis that we must still assess is the assertion that bureaucratization—i.e. the

organization of professional work into a complex division of labor ordered by a hierarchy of positions—has led to the loss of professionals' traditionally asserted right of self-direction.

BUREAUCRATIZATION AND PROFESSIONAL CONTROLS

I have pointed out that it is typical of professionals to be employed rather than self-employed. Furthermore, they are usually employed by organizations—e.g. by schools, hospitals, law firms and legal service organizations, social agencies, colleges, industrial firms—rather than by individuals. In addition, over the past few decades the organizations employing professionals appear to have become larger and more complex. They are often integrated into a still larger public or private system which is frequently called a bureaucracy. In contrast to popular usage where the word bureaucracy connotes inefficiency, in academic usage it connotes efficiency through the meticulous supervision and control of its members and the careful planning of activities. In the context of industrial production, those espousing the proletarianization thesis find an analogue of bureaucratic control in management's "Taylorization" of work-tasks, i.e. through the development of a detailed division of labor and the creation of an elaborate hierarchy of supervision designed to control the performance of the assigned tasks (cf. Braverman 1974). Aronowitz, Oppenheimer, and others advancing the thesis of the proletarianization of professionals obviously have such a parallel with industrial organization in mind. Bureaucratic organization is assumed to be antithetical to the freedom of activity traditionally imputed to the professional.

There is a fairly large literature referring to the conflict between bureaucratic administration and professionalism. The underlying assumption is that professionals owe allegiance to their peers and to their profession. They seek to control their work in light of their own standards, while resisting the necessity of taking orders from bureaucratic superiors who assert the aims of the employing organization (for a review of areas of conflict, see Scott 1966). A number of studies have attempted to demonstrate with varying success that professionals are dissatisfied, even alienated, in bureaucratic organizations. But not all organizations where professionals work possess all of the characteristics of a bureaucracy. Empirical studies of such organizations—e.g. hospitals, law firms, accounting firms, and social agencies—have led to the creation of a variety of concepts representing hybrid forms of organizations that deviate from the bureaucratic model in order to accommodate their professionals. Such terms as advisory bureaucracy (Goss 1961), professional bureaucracy (Smigel 1964), and professional organization (Montagna 1968; Scott 1965) are familiar to students of the literature. These studies, as well as more recent developments

in organizational theory, call into question the validity of the assumption that large organizations employing professionals are sufficiently bureaucratic to allow one to assume that professional work within them is ordered and controlled by strictly bureaucratic means.

By and large, most organizations that employ professionals deviate far more than those that do not from the bureaucratic ideal or, more generally, are more likely to violate the premise that organizations operate as rational systems concerned with maximizing efficiency. Indeed, it is no accident that three of the four representative theorists advancing nonbureaucratic models of organizations whom Scott linked together as proponents of an Open Natural System Model (Scott 1981:128) arrived at their ideas through the empirical study of organizations whose primary productive workers were professionals. The notion of an organization as an "organized anarchy" developed in part over the course of a study of the governance of universities (Cohen & March 1972). The author of the most influential analysis of organizations that contradicts the conventional notion that they function effectively as a result of tight bureaucratic linkage and control of units and who argues that they should be viewed merely as loosely coupled systems elaborated his argument using references to schools and school systems (Weick 1976).

None of these theoretical developments provides any actual empirical proof either that bureaucracy, in the form of pervasive scientific management, does not exist in many organizations employing professionals or that no form of systematic control is exercised over them. They do, however, raise strong doubts about the propriety of assuming—without careful, case-by-case analysis of the empirical evidence—that the controls that are exercised place professionals in a position directly analogous to that of the industrial worker, i.e. being subject to close supervision, having their skills expropriated, lacking discretion in the performance of their work, and the like. Indeed, by examining the framework of law and established practice surrounding the organization and performance of professional work, we move farther and farther away from that analogy.

Let us examine the central issue of autonomy or discretion in the performance of work. All workers everywhere practice some discretion in their work, and as Kusterer (1978) has rightly argued, more knowledge is required to perform even detailed labor than is generally assumed by superordinates. Furthermore, classic industrial relations studies have documented over and over again the power of informal controls among workers in tempering and even sabotaging formal plans. But professionals differ from other workers in the degree of control that they exercise. In U.S. labor law, professional workers are distinguished from ordinary rank and file workers because they are expected to exercise judgment and discretion on a routine, daily basis in the course of performing their work, i.e. discretion is a recognized and legitimate

part of their work role. This characteristic, along with such others as their common training, credentials, and pay differential, is considered sufficiently distinct to justify treating them as special kinds of workers who have the right to choose a collective bargaining agent independently of other employees (cf. Gorman 1976).

In addition, professional workers are subject to a different system of supervision. More often than not, supervisors of industrial and nonprofessional white collar workers are people who have been trained as managers; they usually are not members of the rank and file who have risen in position and assumed greater responsibility. The former are not required to be at least nominally competent in performing the productive labor of those whom they supervise. For a great many professional employees, on the other hand, members of their profession routinely fill the supervisory, managerial, and often even executive positions. In industrial firms employing scientists and engineers, supervisory, managerial, and even higher positions in the hierarchy are filled primarily by employees with professional credentials (cf. Schriesheim et al 1977). At the very least, the first line of hierarchical supervision of professional employees is *always* filled by a professional. For most professionals—accountants, librarians, social workers, nurses, physicians, lawyers, and schoolteachers, among others—the managerial levels above the immediate supervisor are also filled by qualified professionals because it is mandated by law, required for institutional accreditation or chartering, or effectively sustained by custom and convenience. Indeed, for some kinds of organizations providing professional services, it is either a legal necessity or a requirement for accreditation for even the chief executive officer of the organization to be a bona fide member of the profession. Nonprofessional business managers and administrators may become increasingly indispensable, but the professional executive officer exercises ultimate control.

Thus, while rank and file professional workers may have to take orders just as blue collar or clerical workers have to, these orders are given by a superordinate colleague, not by someone trained in management or some other field. Where the work of the professional employees is formally delineated in some detail—"formatted" in the case of engineers (Ritti 1971:18–43)—it is not done by outsiders who have expropriated the professional's skills, but rather by members of the same profession who have specialized in the accomplishment of such tasks. While this formatting does reduce the use of discretion and judgment by *individual* rank and file professional workers, it does not represent a reduction in the control of professional work by the *profession* itself, for other professional workers create it and supervise and manage the rank and file. It is therefore entirely inaccurate to say that the professions as corporate bodies have lost their capacity to exercise control over their members' work, even though individual professionals may have. While there are some new formal controls

that are now exercised over the professions, concepts like deprofessionalization and proletarianization are too far off the mark empirically to illuminate the character and implications of these controls. Let me try to delineate them in the remainder of this paper.

THE FORMALIZATION OF PROFESSIONAL CONTROLS

While the nature of professional control has changed, it remains largely dominated by the professions themselves, although it is limited, as is always the case, by the resources allocated to the support of professional work by the state, by the governing boards of firms and other institutions, by managers, and by individual clients. Professional controls in the past were largely informal, sustaining a live-and-let-live relationship among colleagues and preventing open conflict between professional elites and ordinary practitioners. Recent events have considerably weakened the grounds for such a relationship, while reinforcing and formalizing the differences in prestige and authority that have always existed within the professions. If there is any historic parallel to this situation, it is not to be found in the relations between capitalists and industrial workers so much as in the relations between masters and journeymen during the later days of the preindustrial guilds (cf. Thrupp 1963).

The first element that has changed the relationship among presumptive peers is suggested by current efforts to apply antitrust laws to the professions. Nominally, these efforts attempt to substitute regulation by the competitive process of the market for self-regulation. Effective regulation by the market presupposes that there are no barriers to competition, i.e. no "restraints of trade," so that any form of collusion aimed at fixing prices, restricting consumer knowledge of price and other kinds of product information, or excluding competitors from the market is prohibited. Therefore, over the past decade a series of legal cases mounted as Sherman antitrust or as First Amendment (freedom of commercial speech) actions has significantly altered the economic framework of professional practice for that small number of professions which have numerous self-employed practitioners. The courts have struck down professional bans on advertising that is not false or misleading, including publicizing the prices of routine services and goods, and on competitive bidding. Price-fixing in the form of standardized or minimum fees has also been swept away.

While court decisions have significantly reduced the professions' capacity to restrict competition among their members, neither judicial nor legislative actions have seriously diminished the barriers to competition created by occupational licensing laws. With minor exceptions, in the United States these matters (cf. Shimberg 1982) fall under the jurisdiction of states and localities, not of the federal government. Broad, national action to eliminate or reduce

licensing is therefore difficult to mount. Indeed, while there have been revisions in the licensing laws in one state or another, there has been no overall movement toward eliminating licensing itself, despite a great deal of discontent with the process. Some potential competitors to the established professions have been licensed in certain areas—nurse practitioners, midwives, and denturists, for example—but the scope of their work has been carefully limited. There has been nothing resembling the deregulation of competition *among* professions. Therefore, the major role market forces now play lies in relations among colleagues *within* given professions.

It is assumed that the economic consequences of this limited deregulation will be lower costs to the consumer, in part because consumers will select practitioners who charge lower fees, and also because new forms of practice will evolve. Through price-cutting, attractive advertising, and an increase in scale it has recently become possible to develop commercial chains for the provision of tax accounting, optometric, dental, legal, and medical services which are staffed by professional employees and directed by professional managers. It is much too early to tell, but it is quite possible that costs will fall and that the average income of professionals will decline compared to other groups over the next few decades.

The potential consequences of an increase in intraprofessional competition are more than merely economic, however. Traditional professional codes of ethics designed to restrict competition among colleagues were not solely economic either in their intent or their consequences. By banning overt, public appeals aimed at attracting a clientele by making invidious distinctions among professionals—appeals which, in the past, included outright deprecation of the competence of colleagues—these codes also helped sustain a certain solidarity within the professions. Price competition always existed—there were always celebrated as well as humble practitioners and the former charged far higher fees than the latter. When all were limited to a single method of announcing their availability to their potential clientele and prevented from making any *public* reference to charging higher or lower fees, however, the fiction of a company of equals could be preserved. Deregulation now allows, perhaps requires, the public display of differences among colleagues. If enough professionals take advantage of this opportunity, the professions may no longer be able to sustain their public image of solidarity and uniform competence. Indeed, the solidarity they did have may disappear.

Another traditional custom that helped to preserve professional solidarity was the avoidance of public and formal criticism of colleagues' competence and ethics. As more than one commentator has observed, it used to be difficult to get professionals to testify against a colleague in malpractice suits. Furthermore, the disciplinary boards maintained by professional associations, as well as those attached to state licensing boards, seemed to act slowly, if at all, in response to consumer complaints. They seldom censured their colleagues

and revoked their licenses even less frequently. Political pressures have now forced the professions to be more active in such affairs, thus setting colleague against colleague. In the case of medicine, which has been subject to the greatest political pressure, it is now mandatory for all physicians who hospitalize their patients to be subject to a formal review and evaluation of their decisions by a committee of colleagues. The live-and-let-live etiquette of the past can no longer preserve the facade of equality in probity and competence. Physicians and other professionals must now judge each other, and more importantly, do so formally and sometimes publicly. The conspiracy of silence, as well as the conspiracy of tolerance, has been seriously challenged. As a consequence, trust in one's colleagues' discretion and good will may also be undermined.

The fiction that colleagues are essentially equal in competence, authority, and power and that they basically share the same interests has also been weakened, particularly in the case of professional organizations that are large enough to require full-time administrative officers. The professionals who serve in executive, managerial, and supervisory roles are clearly delineated by their formal rank, and their authority is distinct from that of their rank and file "colleagues." Professional stratification in organizations involves differences in official authority and power that in turn produce varying perspectives on the professional enterprise. Rank and file professionals are primarily preoccupied with performing their work according to their own view of the intrinsic practical problems and of the necessary means of coping with them on a day-to-day basis (Lipsky 1980). In contrast, supervisory professionals are accountable for the aggregate performance of the workers under them and they tend to have an organizational perspective. They identify as much, if not more, with the type of professional organization they represent as with the practicing profession.

As the threat of legal action, government regulation and, in commercial enterprises, investor pressure for higher profits all increase an organization's accountability for the performance of its professional workers, those in the administrative elite will be more likely to assume a less collegial and a more superordinate relationship with their subordinate colleagues. Given the professional credentials of the administrative stratum of the profession, its members are at least nominally qualified to issue directives governing the work of the rank and file. In doing so, they violate the traditional etiquette of an earlier day (Goss 1961) and so mark their distance from their nominal colleagues. The collegium becomes formally and overtly divided into those with administrative power and those who perform the productive labor.

By itself, the administrative elite is in a position to assert economic and administrative, but not technical or cognitive, power. They may be technocrats (Heydebrand 1979), but they do not produce the professionally legitimate technical knowledge that they use to order, assess, and direct the work of the

rank and file. The source of such knowledge is another elite segment of the professions composed of those who devote themselves on a full-time basis to research.

The most important difference between the modern professions and the crafts and earlier guilds lies in the way in which the former have systematically developed a relationship with the university. The professions control innovation largely by having a special class of members in professional schools that are devoted to research, experimental practice, and theorizing. This group constitutes the knowledge elite of the professions, and its members both teach professionals-in-training the latest knowledge and techniques and explore new areas. Making decisions about public policy issues has increasingly required scientific advice. This advice is provided by the knowledge elite, which is called to testify, to serve on committees recommending guidelines to govern professional practice, and to formulate acceptable standards for evaluating professional performance.

Lacking its own authority of expertise, the administrative elite must invoke the standards and guidelines of the knowledge elite in its directives aimed at formulating and evaluating the work of the rank and file. Since the standards of the knowledge elite are grounded in the abstract world of logic, scientific principles, and statistical probabilities rather than in the concrete world of work, in experimental designs and controlled laboratory findings rather than in the untidy, uncontrolled arena of practice, and in circumstances that are considerably less subject to the constraints of time, money, equipment, and other resources than is true of everyday practice, it is not hard to understand the skepticism of the rank and file professional. Indeed, historically, resentment and tension between town and gown, between practitioner and academic, have existed coterminously with the university itself as well as with its professional schools. With the formal invocation of academic standards as a means of legitimizing the increasingly self-conscious, formal, and public control of everyday professional practice, the tension between the rank and file practitioner and the knowledge elite cannot fail to grow as well, creating a deeper division between them than existed when practitioners were free to ignore the standards established by the latter, if they so chose.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF FORMALIZATION

I have tried to stress that none of these tensions is historically new for the professions. As long as there have been professions, there has been competition among its members. So, too, there has always been stratification, both of intellectual authority and of economic power. What is new today is the magnification and formalization of these relationships into a considerably more

overt and consequential system of stratification within the profession which can no longer be protected by the face-saving norms of traditional professional etiquette. Nonetheless, so long as the formulation, direction, and execution of the control of professional work remains in the hands of members of the profession, it is not intellectually useful to employ either of the concepts of proletarianization or deprofessionalization. But when one elite formulates the standards, another elite directs and controls, and other professionals perform the work, something important has happened to the organization of the profession as a body and to the relations between its members which may have serious implications for its corporate character in the future.

In a well-known article, Goode (1957) characterized a profession as a "community," a group that shares a common experience and identity. While it is true that professions are divided internally by specialization and intellectual orientation into segments (Bucher & Strauss 1961) and by the differences in interest, power, and prestige connected with the clientele being served (Laumann & Heinz 1977), Goode's characterization is relevant for professions like law and medicine. They have a long tradition, a distinct (though inaccurate) public image and identity, and a fairly homogeneous system of professional training. While they have been internally divided both by stratification and by specialization, and the membership in their professional associations has never been complete and has fluctuated a great deal, they have nonetheless sustained a community in Goode's sense, i.e. they have maintained a degree of solidarity that allows us accurately to characterize them as single professions. The divisions within them have not been great enough to lead to exclusive, warring associations that share no consistent common interest. It is this community, however, that is likely to be seriously threatened by the formalization of professional controls. Rank and file practitioners could conceivably split off from researchers and administrators and only participate in those associations that reflect their interests, leaving the elites to participate in their own.

While this possibility may be a novelty for physicians and lawyers, it is not a new development for the broad aggregate of professions in general, most of which are already divided in this fashion. Consider schoolteachers: Their administrative superiors—principals and superintendents—usually have had training as teachers in schools of education and some years of experience in classroom teaching. Indeed, such training and experience are often prerequisite qualifications for their positions. Similarly, the experts who formulate the guidelines and standards employed in schools are usually faculty members of schools of education, or are professionally qualified staff members of state boards of education. Even though they perform different functions, all may be seen as part of the same profession. The divisions among the three strata are so great, however, that in effect they are separate. There is even militant trade unionism among the rank and file practitioners, which is a rare occurrence

among professions in the United States (cf. Marcus 1973). Medicine, law, dentistry, and other professions that have not been subject to formal controls up to now may move in the same direction.

Nonetheless, it is by no means inevitable that professions that undergo a formalization of collegial relations, with a division into administrative elites, knowledge elites, and rank and file workers, will break up into distinct and separate corporate entities. But it does seem unavoidable that, with or without collective bargaining, the level of conflict will intensify, because the formalization of social control creates organized groups with different perspectives, interests, and demands. It also poses new and unaccustomed obstructions which reduce practitioners' capacity to perform their daily work in a manner that satisfies them (quite apart from whether they receive the compensation to which they believe they are entitled). Notwithstanding, there is little evidence that the special status of the rank and file professionals will deteriorate so much that they will find themselves in the same position as other workers. Even though they will be subject to more formal controls than in the past, they will probably continue to have distinct occupational identities, rather than being mere jobholders. In all likelihood, they will also exercise considerably more discretion than other workers in performing their work, and will be able to participate in formulating standards and evaluating their own performance through some type of peer review. Finally, they will still enjoy at least occupational kinship with their superiors.

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE PROFESSIONS

In conclusion, it is essential to point out that a major source of the deficiencies in the theories of deprofessionalization and proletarianization lies in their ambiguous conception of the professions. In their own way, proponents of each theory implicitly conceptualize the professions as collections of fully autonomous, highly prestigious, individual entrepreneurs who can essentially do what they please. Neither corporate organization nor legal and political status—both of which play an important role in sustaining privilege and power—nor any other institutional characteristics that influence labor market status figure in this conception. Such an incomplete conception is neither analytically coherent nor empirically salient, even as an ideal type, to most professions since the nineteenth century. The problem lies not so much in these particular theories as in the state of theorizing about the professions in general, which they reflect quite faithfully.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Freidson 1983), sociological theorizing about the professions has typically never gone more than halfway toward two possible positions. On the one hand, one can theorize about professions as concrete, historic forms of organization which some largely middle-class

occupations developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These forms vary markedly from one country to another, though they preserve some significant commonalities in English-speaking nations. Adequate theorizing therefore requires a close analysis of concrete institutions and social categories, foregoing any effort to develop general, positivistic concepts. On the other hand, one can conceptualize professions as a special kind of occupation that is singled out and defined on the basis of abstract, theoretical considerations—as organized occupations that enjoy a special shelter in the labor market, for example (Freidson 1982), or as occupations whose members maintain control over their fate (Child & Fulk, 1982). To adopt this alternative, however, requires dispensing with history in the sense that it is the abstract conception of the occupation, not the fact that some occupation may be commonly regarded as a profession in some nation at some point in time, that determines what one studies and the variables one elaborates. Pursuing both of these tasks, which are essential when performed separately, will greatly advance our future understanding of the professions and their role in modern societies.

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