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Sociological and organisational theories of professions and professionalism

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Introduction

In everyday speech to be professional requires only that a person is paid for their work and/or adopts a business-like approach to it. Professionalism is an attitude to work which anyone may adopt. Researchers understand professions and professionalism differently, however. For them, professionals are members of a limited group of high-status service occupations such as medicine, engineering and law. In addition to being repositories of authoritative knowledge, these occupations have some common features: restricted entry, high-level qualifications and stringent tests of competence, together with distinctive types of formal organisation. It is because of the high status and supposed effectiveness of established professions that aspects of their outlook and behaviour are claimed for work of every type.

The delivery of expert services by discrete, independent and high-status occupations, each with a monopoly of a specialised type of knowledge, is not the only way of organising the supply of expertise. Thus, the question of how professions have come into being, and what sustains their continuing importance in the modern world (around a thousand years after their first creation) is important and an issue on which the theories to be considered in this chapter have a bearing.

Outline of the chapter

This chapter considers, first, the historically important and theoretically distinct approaches to the professions which provide insights into their origins and character. Second, it is then proposed that the resulting accumulated research has so broadened our understanding that there is now a widely shared knowledge of the kinds of professions that have emerged and of the processes of change typically affecting them. Third, whilst there is agreement on many fronts, there remain some important theoretical differences concerning the causes of change and how to explain them. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the likely future of professions and predicts further decline in their importance.
1 Historical schools of thought

Analysts of professions usually distinguish different schools of thought (Suddaby and Muzio, 2015). There are benefits in approaching history in this way. It is economical in presenting the range of opinions about the professions and indicates something of the differences of emphasis in the writings of leading researchers. But the idea of distinctive theories is misleading if it is assumed that contributions only make sense within a particular perspective and there is no common ground between them. The proposition that different perspectives are fundamentally incommensurable because they are conceptually distinct is not as widely accepted as it was. Today it is thought there are findings in common between different approaches to the professions, including ideas about processes of change.

1.1 Traits of professions

Early writers on the professions, amongst other things, made some attempt to describe the characteristics of professions which made them distinct from other occupations. From this the suggestion has been made that the first approach to the professions was something called ‘trait theory’. One problem with this is that there was (and still is) only limited agreement as to what the traits of professions are or why they are important. Also, a list of traits alone is insufficient for a theory, which requires proposals about causality to be made.

Whether there was an agreed list of traits in early works is highly doubtful. One of the key texts usually cited as the start of trait theory is by Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933). This was certainly written before the literature on professions proliferated in the 1950s. But it is difficult to find a list of attributes of professions there. Analysing professions is not considered until Part III of the book and the discussion is inconclusive. The evidence considered is drawn from documents produced by a sample of British professional associations, and discussion is tied to views recorded. This writing has conceptual elements, but they stem from the authors’ concern with improving the quality of the population (eugenics). Other texts also supposedly foundational for trait theory by Cogan (1953) and Greenwood (1957) were written for members of particular occupations – educationists and social workers respectively. It is difficult to see these as serious contributions to theory.

The traits envisaged by writers increased with time, however. Most lists referred to expertise, a consistent body of knowledge, and certification of competency. Willensky (1964) discussed a sequence in which traits might be acquired, whilst others also tried to measure them (Millerson, 1964; Hickson and Thomas, 1967), but there were many exceptions and anomalies. There was a teleological cast to this listing. Professions were successful because of their attributes: prolonged education, specialised knowledge, regulatory associations, developed rules and codes of ethics etc. Too often it was simply assumed that these traits must be the cause of professional effectiveness, but how and why was unanalysed.

1.2 Functionalist accounts

The first recognisably theoretical account of the professions was functionalism. Functionalism proposes that groups and institutions exist because they are functional for society. The theory is described as ‘holistic’ because the reasons for the parts taking their form is sought in the character of the whole. This approach developed strongly in North America after 1950, but originated in Europe in the nineteenth century. A key source of ideas here was Émile Durkheim (d 1917), who thought civic and professional organisations (with their origins in antiquity) would continue to
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be valuable elements of economically advanced societies (translated, 1957). Durkheim thought modernisation of society could lead to continuing political instability, but that professions and civil organisations would act as counter-balancing sources of power and authority to the state and military (Turner, 1992). Such institutions would provide a differentiated condition of culture (the ‘conscience collective’) appropriate to economically developed societies, and supporting social responsibility and altruism. Thus, professions contribute to order and avoidance of (a) authoritarianism (by the state or political power) and (b) rootlessness and anarchy (anomie). The functionality attributed to institutions in this theory was thus highly qualified. It was not suggested institutions necessarily contribute to social order, but that appropriate institutions will improve functionality and avert incipient crisis.

Durkheim’s approach was taken up by another key figure, Talcott Parsons, whose new variant of functionalism was popularised in America after World War II. In his mature work, Parsons (1953) proposed a theory featuring the self-adjusting tendencies of groups and organisations within society. Durkheim’s idea that functionality was not automatic and needs to be fostered was lost. In its place was the idea that society would automatically tend towards equilibrium. In Parsons’ thought, integration occurred through four processes – adaptation (necessary to meet changed economic and political conditions), new goal attainment (innovation necessary to effective competition and in response to changed conditions), reintegration (necessary for institutions to accommodate change) and pattern maintenance or latency (homeostasis to provide continuity).

It might be thought that Parsons would conclude that professions contribute more to integration and homeostasis than to innovation, but this is incorrect. Brante suggests (2011) that Parsons discussed professions as part of a range of elite occupations, including business executives and administrators, which he regarded as functionally similar. All these occupations alike were seen as bearers of progressive, rational values, all feeding off and indebted to developments within pure science. These ideas give a limiting idea of the professions, and do not allow key questions such as why some professions are developed to an exceptional degree but others are not. Parsons also had little to say about the different types of formal organisation of professions, except to imply that the more functional for society they are, the more developed occupations would be.

Functionalists assume that professions serve the public good and are altruistic (Goode, 1957). However, such claims were generally not tested. Despite attempts to put the study of professionalism on an objective basis, for example by the use of measurement by Millerson (1964), such methods were difficult to develop and apply. Indeed, many noticed practices that were obviously self-serving rather than altruistic, such as suspending the operation of market processes and relying on professional judgement as the basis of provision. Many also noted the tendency of professional groups to limit supply of qualified practitioners, so increasing rewards as well as sustaining quality. Problems arising from the contentions of functionalism thus grew in the 1970/80s.

Functionalist thinking was also widely applied to organisations. The influential ‘Aston Group’, for example, assumed organisations adapted their structures to remain functional and efficient. These researchers set out to study large samples of firms, and their approach was called contingency theory because they thought organisations must adapt to market, technical and other environmental ‘contingencies’. In their research they found two types of organisation approximating bureaucracy: what they called ‘work-flow bureaucracies’ and ‘personnel bureaucracies’ (Pugh and Hickson, 1976, p. 161). The latter are large, service organisations typically employing many professionals. Thus the Aston researchers suggested that bureaucratic organisations and professionals within them would adapt to externally imposed demands for change. As contemporary research showed, however, adaptation was not automatic and there were sometimes groups within
existing structures who would resist change (Burns and Stalker, 1961). Subsequent research into the professions has amply shown this tendency amongst professionals (Ackroyd, 1996).

1.3 Conflict theory

Marx (d 1883) and Weber (d 1920) saw conflict as basic to understanding social change. Neither presented extended work on modern professions, but later researchers developed a distinctive approach to professions from their initial insights.

For Marx, the main source of professional revenue would be from services provided to capitalists or other members of the middle class. The existence of such groups as lawyers and managers was to be understood in terms of their relationship with the capital-owning class. This was a different explanation from that of functionalists, being cast in terms of self-interested motives of professionals, and related to their relative social position. Weber was more aware of the range of historical variation in the beliefs and practices of groups and their connections with society, but, like Marx, he assumed self-interest was endemic. In the first chapter of *Economy and Society*, Weber compares the operation of social groups, and he proposes, amongst other things, that groups can be artificially closed in various ways. This is a possibility he illustrated briefly with the case of lawyers in early modern England (1968, pp. 43–47). The idea of closure by social groups, as developed by Weber’s followers, has made an important contribution to the explanation of social processes (Parkin, 1979). It has also been applied with good effect to the analysis of professions (MacDonald, 1995; Murphy, 1988).

The conflict approach to professions, then, focuses on the (often latent) practices of professions designed to restrict supply of services. In this approach, educational requirements, registration and licensing are now recast as devices to restrict the supply of skilled labour and so to enhance status and earnings. Using these ideas, Johnson (1972) pinpointed a key feature of established professions. They had, he suggested, a high level of control over membership and used this to sustain the quality of services and enhance the social standing and earnings of existing members. Johnson called these professions ‘collegiate professions’ because they are controlled by the college of the qualified membership. Control was actually secured by a strong professional association empowered to license competent practice, membership of which was obligatory. He concluded that professions are not a type of occupation so much as ‘a peculiar means of occupational control’ (1972, p. 27).

M. S. Larson (1977) extended this view, pointing out that the labour market is potentially weakening for occupations competing to translate their particular skills into social and economic rewards. She analysed what the professions did as ‘occupational development projects’. Larson shows that professions undertake their projects by attaining control of the market for skilled work. Freidson (1986, 2001) also suggested the professional project aimed to control the terms of trade and conditions of work (the professional labour process). These ideas became widely perceived as appropriate from the end of the 1970s, when social and economic change intensified in the West, sharpening social and economic differences. At that time, right-wing governments in the UK and USA attempted to extend the operation of the market and to weaken the power of professions. At this time, too, income became increasingly important as an indicator of status. Occupational prestige was connected with standards of living more so than any putative status deriving from a supposed contribution to greater social good.

The conflict approach does not suggest the only motive behind professional organisation is pursuit of status or wealth to the exclusion of other objectives, nor is it conceivable that professions pursue their aims without regard to other groups. Such suggestions oversimplify the proposed causality here. Professions seek to suspend the operation of open markets for labour
by controlling the right to designate who is allowed to claim and sell expertise. Thus professionals certainly seek high earnings and status, but they also must attend to the quality and value of their services, which also leads them to control entry. Understanding this motivational pattern means analysts must consider the institutional circumstances in which professions initially achieved their privileged position and the strategies they have used in this context to advance. The idea of a professional project allows the analyst to trace the processes by which occupations have developed themselves and to explain their relative success. Thus the conflict approach gives rise to a systematic research agenda into the development of forms of professionalism and professional organisation.

1.4 Professions as exponents of discourses

A development in the study of professions in the 1990s entailed a new focus on the ideas professionals espouse and how these are organised into professional narratives or discourses. Discourses deploy ideas and arguments that sustain practices. Attention to discourses addresses questions of how professionals conduct themselves to establish the legitimacy of their activities. At the time, attention to such matters was often seen as part of an intellectual movement away from the concerns of traditional ideas, and especially theories like functionalism and conflict theory, which purport to explain general movements of society and history.

The approach has serious intellectual provenance. A key text for its development was Berger and Luckmann’s path-finding work (1966). This has various sources of intellectual inspiration, one of which is the sociology of knowledge, which suggests that what is known by people and accepted as true is shaped by the form of society and set of institutions in which those convictions were created. Berger and Luckmann also draw on two other types of literature: first, American social psychology with its roots in pragmatist philosophy. This contributes ideas about the way subjective ideas produce a perception that there is a world outside of us, which seems to be external and fixed, though it is actually produced and reproduced by everyday actions. Amongst the key contributors here was G. H. Mead (1934), who argues that it is through the use of language and symbolism that people differentiate themselves from others and create their identity. Analytically viewed, our sense of reality is sustained by our shared participation. A third ingredient is the philosophy of writers such as Sartre (existentialism) and Heidegger (phenomenology), who share the conviction that people need not regard their lives as being externally determined. Berger and Luckmann did not fully draw out the political implications of their writing, but they did help produce a new emphasis in social study which made ‘the social construction of reality’, and the role of key groups in doing this, fundamental.

Researchers using this perspective applied to the professions (Fournier, 1999; Dent and Whitehead, 2002; Anderson-Gough et al., 1999) have been sensitive to the ways in which professions have sought to negotiate their way of looking at things and to persuade others of its validity. The discourses of groups are so formative they shape the individual’s sense of self and identity.

1.5 Holism resurgent: institutions and archetypes

Some claim today that institutional theory is a new and distinctive approach to the study of organisations (Suddaby and Muzio, 2015). However, this approach shares many assumptions of functionalism, including the basic idea that organisations are largely shaped by entities outside them. In this case it is not, as it was with functionalism, society that has the formative role, it is the ‘organisational field’ of similar organisations (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Thus, formative effects shape organisations within a field, constraining them to adopt a similar
structure and to act in similar ways. A particular institutional field is identified, and its constitution is then considered to explain the entities within. However, if formative effects are primarily from field to organisations, how does change in fields occur? More seriously, if this is the main formative effect, it is hard to say how fields arise in the first place. Actually, change is seen to require intervention by leading groups, and professions are often seen as key agents of change in this way.

Institutional theorists suggest that modern organisations are little different from other institutions, and the appropriate way to analyse them is as social phenomena with special qualities which artificially restrict and channel the action of individuals. Thus, existing institutions are constitutive models, establishing the available range of viable organisational types and types of acceptable actions (Muzio et al., 2013). Within institutions, the perceptions and activities of participants are shaped by specific, identifiable cognitive schemas, scripts, and ways of thinking. The need for continuity and stability is achieved within the organisation by established norms of conduct and ritual actions and outside by the tendency for institutions to adopt similar forms. The main thrust is to explain the similarity or ‘isomorphism’ of institutions by seeing them as conforming to the expectations of established practice in their fields. However, the approach seemingly ignores the well-established accounts of organisations and the differences between them and institutions. Modern organisations are usually thought of as deliberately designed to meet limited objectives, in contrast to institutions with customary forms serving multiple purposes. For Weber and Tonnies, modern organisations, as distinct from traditional institutions, are marked by their rationality and specialisation. Thus, arguably, whether they fully realise it or not, professions are important to institutionalists because they fall between these two types of entities, having properties of both. Professions have existed for hundreds of years and yet they are repositories of advanced knowledge. This makes them both traditional and modern.

Archetype theory is the leading institutional theory applied to organisational change, particularly change in professions (Hinings and Greenwood, 1988). It offers accounts of how professional organisations are capable of change, despite their tendencies to continuity and persistence. To advance their argument, these researchers introduce the concept of a ‘design archetype’ (Hinings and Greenwood, 1988). This proposes that an organisation as a whole consists of, first, ‘a set of structures and systems…’ that, second, ‘… consistently embodies a single interpretative scheme’ (Greenwood and Hinings, 1993, p. 1055). Thus the organisational structure is shaped by deeper values shared by organisational members. These values relate to how organisations define their domain, the relevant principles of governance and criteria for evaluation. These authors emphasise the formative importance of culture by claiming that interpretive schemes embody ‘prevailing conceptions of what an organization should be doing, of how it should be doing it and how it should be judged’ (Hinings and Greenwood, 1988, p. 295).

Dominant interpretive schemes of organisations are shared by members and other organisations and are thus held to originate outside the individual organisation. They are ‘ideational templates … originating outside the organization and … relevant to a population of organizations within an organizational field’ (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996, p. 1026). It is assumed that within a given ‘institutional sphere’, strong pressures for archetypal conformity will operate upon individual organisations. These pressures are forceful in professional fields. Nevertheless, change in organisations does occur, and professional organisations can innovate. The argument developed is that the changing environment, as interpreted by organisational members, is the inner mechanism of change. It is this interpretation that produces ideas about the need for change and the form it might take. Hinings and Greenwood formulate their view that a new design archetype must be developed as a workable model before successful change can take place (1988).
2 Professions in process

As has been shown, in recent decades there has been a great deal of work completed by researchers considering the professions and especially in studying the changing character of professional organisations. Not long ago it was held that different theoretical approaches in social science are fundamentally different perspectives, producing results that cannot be connected or used in conjunction. This view itself was derived from the idea of scientific paradigms, a concept from the sociology of science (Kuhn, 1962) which was applied to the study of organisations (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Today it is possible to see these ideas as in some ways seriously misleading, among other things, possibly impeding the accumulation of knowledge. Hence, in this chapter it will be suggested that knowledge of the professions and professionalism has actually developed a great deal and there are now large areas of common ground shared by researchers, which can be initially summarised as follows.

First, professions and their organisations are now seen to be dynamic. Looked at through the quotidian details of professional practice, as discourse analysts suggest, it is hard to avoid such a conclusion. As a result of this work, it is recognised that professions undertake substantial tasks of persuasion as a part of their practical activity. Today, it is not really credible to study the professions without investigating the substance of professional motivations and outlooks. The key question now is not whether the views of professionals and the discourses they develop are interesting, but what role they play in processes of change.

Second, although there is recognition of complexity in the process of continuity and change of professions, there are now some well-known patterns. Whilst there are short-term changes in the forms and subjects of professional discourses, there is enormous continuity in professional relationships and the structures of professional organisations. It seems clear that some professions have developed into distinctive forms which have been slow to change. However, there are identifiable pathways to the production of distinctive professional forms and these are well known in Britain and North America, but perhaps less so elsewhere. Thus, although there is recognition that professions are dynamic, change has limits. Professionals as active agents have to work through existing sets of relationships within specific organisational forms and organisational fields. There is thus, in many aspects of professional practice, a bias towards conservatism, a tendency to stick with what is known. The fascination of professions resides in how they combine the creation of new knowledge but do so within deeply traditional structures and relationships. Today, as will be discussed below, it is possible to distinguish a great deal about the pathways taken in the process of creation, development and change of professions and to be clear about their patterns of organisation.

2.1 Contemporary forms of professional organisation

In the following account, consideration of the processes of continuity and change is undertaken in the context of known types of professions. Four distinctive types of professions are presented and the pressures for change to which each have been and are now subject are also discussed. The following classification of the professions relates to the ideal types of profession seen in Britain and North America and has many similarities with other typologies (Reed, 1996).

2.1.1 Collegiate professions

Collegiate professions are descendants of the original form of the profession (Johnson, 1972). Both the professional association and the constituent professional organisations until recently lacked a single executive head, indicated at the organisational level by use of the partnership
form. The professional body is, however, strongly regulatory of conduct, being governed by the qualified membership. Licensing of practitioners by professional bodies is a key feature, allowing effective occupational closure. Another key feature is that the organisation delivering services is typically owned and controlled by the principal providers of services. Thus collegiate professions are of interest because of the long-term survival of features of the traditional organisational form. But this does not mean there is no change. Until towards the end of the last century, both law and medicine were good examples of collegiate professions, but whether medicine can claim this in the UK today is doubtful. Though not initially collegiate professions, architecture and leading sections of accountants have joined this group.

2.1.2 Are collegiate professions viable?

Collegiate professions bear the imprint of history. In such matters as their self-regulation and partnership membership they are unlike other organisations. In the UK and USA there is thus some vitality in the traditional professions, as is indicated by the use of the partnership form which combines ownership and control of firms in the hands of professionals (Empson, 2007). However, some of the collegiate firms are very large indeed. The largest legal firms – sometimes called ‘megalaw’ (Flood, 1996) – are firms with thousands of partners and tens of thousands of employees. These are commercial law firms specialising in global legal services. Their large scale and the fact that, these days, not all of the lawyers are partners, may be thought to compromise the model. With the large commercial law firm there has been a trend towards increasing hierarchy and permanent employee status for lower-level professionals (Muzio and Ackroyd, 2005). However, smaller legal practices, lacking access to global markets for legal services, have also tended to grow in size and geographic coverage, so that the single or very small legal practice is increasingly rare. Changes in the institutional arrangements for the training of lawyers have led to the reworking of closure, from reliance on the external labour market to control of promotion and access to partnerships within firms (Muzio, 2004).

As has been mentioned, archetype theorists argue that a new organisational ‘design archetype’ has emerged to supersede the traditional profession involving the use of professional managers to coordinate activities within firms and improve efficiency. Instead of the higher levels of professional organisations being exclusively made up of senior professionals, as in the traditional collegiate firm, archetype theorists think a managed professional business (MPB) has emerged. Drawing on their research including small samples in law and accountancy (Cooper et al., 1996; Brock et al., 1999), it is suggested that the MPB is becoming dominant. This form is said to be a ‘clear departure’ (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991, p. 8) from the earlier form. At the heart of the MPB is an interpretive scheme stressing different values, such as efficiency, client centredness and managed modes of governance (Cooper et al., 1996). A limited amount of quantitative research has tested these propositions, but there are reasons for thinking the trend towards collegiate professional firms controlled by managers is not supported by data relating to the population of English legal firms. First, because there is huge demand for professional services and profits are high, such firms have grown prodigiously and become global providers without any commensurate growth in numbers of managers (Ackroyd and Muzio, 2007). Second, as has been argued by Freidson (2001) and Perkin (1989), professional priorities and logic are different from managerial and entrepreneurial ideas. For this reason, they are uneasy collaborators (Raelin, 1985). If the institutionalists are right and management practices and logic have become dominant over professional logic, there has been really substantial change in these firms. Whether they are truly professional firms or just another managed business is in question.
Architects and leading sections of accountancy share the attributes of law firms. Here, too, leading organisations are global firms and still partnerships (Pinnington and Morris, 2002). Although the number of global accountancy firms reduced to four in 2002 with the collapse of Arthur Andersen in the wake of the Enron scandal, the numbers of accountants employed in large accountancy firms has not fallen.

By contrast with these developments, there have been movements in the other direction – from collegiate professionalism to organisational professionalism. The medical profession in Britain has been less successful than lawyers in reorganising and preserving independence from external control. Their position was weakened once their main employers became the state (1948). However, it was not until more recently that, among other things, reforms of medical education have wrested control of the supply of trainee doctors away from the main professional body (the British Medical Association). At the same time, externally imposed changes to medical education have weakened the content of medical training (Bolton et al., 2011). There have been many studies of changes in the medical profession in response to policy changes in the UK in recent decades. In particular, the introduction of new managerial procedures and quasi-markets has weakened professional autonomy and the ability of professionals to control their work. Dent (2008) argued that external controls of medical practice have intensified hospital doctors’ work, and this has had an impact on the division of labour between doctors and other health professionals. Dent and colleagues (Dent and Barry, 2004) enumerate the new agencies involved in the emerging managerialised health care and the new procedures they have introduced. In addition to these increased controls, there has been growing intrusion of private capital into the provision of medical services (Pollock, 2005) in all areas – both in hospital provision and primary care.

Reviewing the evidence regarding the legal and medical professions, it is clear there are important differences in the success with which the collegiate form has been preserved and developed.

2.2 Organisational professions

Many contemporary professions have never approximated the collegiate pattern. Mostly, they have secured effective licensing of practitioners and so a significant degree of occupational closure, but typically their members do not own or control their own organisations and are thus largely dependent on employment in large organisations and subordinated to executive power. Thus we call them organisational professions.

There are two sub-variants, professions dependent on modern industrial and commercial organisations and those dependent on employment by the state. The first group, e.g. engineers, usually originated as specialised employees in industry and commerce. The status of engineers as professionals turned on the relative success with which (a) the profession closed itself to unqualified entrants and (b) raised the perceived quality of work of qualified persons. Even today, this profession does not have exclusive rights to the use of the designation ‘engineer’, though some branches have achieved high status and rewards. Although there are examples of professional firms owned and run by these professionals, and which therefore qualify to some extent as collegiate professions, the majority of these professionals are employed in large organisations. Some professions – accountants and pharmacists, for example – advanced themselves by making regulatory bargains with the state. Contemporary joiners of this group are human resource managers and project managers.

2.2.1 The experience of private sector organisational professions

In Britain and North America, many occupations consolidated their position as professions in the late nineteenth century but a few have moved beyond the status of organisational professions.
Accountancy has partly developed into a collegiate profession, whilst other parts remain in the organisational professional form. With origins in book-keeping, accountancy became indispensable to business in the nineteenth century by developing crucial expertise, forming professional associations and licensing practitioners. The state also developed an interest in the regulatory potential of accountants in the control of businesses. By the end of the first half of the twentieth century, members of the Chartered Accountants Association in the UK, which assiduously constructed its identity as the elite group, were increasingly able to set themselves up as private partnerships, and here has been the emergence of large accountancy firms. Executives with accountancy qualifications were also recruited in increasing numbers to the boards of companies. In the UK in 2010, there were around 100,000 doctors with practice licences, but nearly three times that number of licensed accountants. The number of students registered with the professional accountancy bodies in the UK at the time (170,000) was more than half the number of qualified professionals in practice, suggesting buoyant growth. The numbers in training in accountancy now dwarfs the numbers in engineering, mathematics and the sciences.

The development of organisations needing specialised expertise was the key condition for growth of professions in the late nineteenth century. Professional bodies made extra-contractual bargains with their employers concerning the supply of expert employees and their working conditions, but they remained employees. Whereas many accountants have made a successful move into private practice, only a small fraction of engineers, surveyors and pharmacists are partners of organisations supplying these services. Given the importance of engineering in British industrial history, the failure of the engineers to become a powerful and independent profession in the nineteenth century is striking. Today the downward trend in this profession is the compelling point of interest. In 2010, the British Engineering Council argued that there will be a large shortfall in the numbers of engineers in training, estimating that 100,000 trainee engineers would shortly be required simply to replace the engineers likely to retire in the next five years. However, employment opportunities for qualified engineers are in decline and the lack of recruits to training places and degree courses realistically reflects this.

There are some examples of occupations developing towards organisational professions. These include project managers and human resource managers. Hodgson’s studies (2002) of project managers suggest that neither recent formation nor proximity to private capitalism are necessarily inimical to the achievement of professional organisation. The expertise of project management is in demand in the age of ‘fast-capitalism’, as corporations restructure themselves through the use of subsidiaries and supply chains and adopt business processes that involve the extensive use of projects. Hodgson’s analysis captures the efforts of this occupation to apply the early techniques of project management outside of their context of discovery, which was heavy mechanical engineering. The occupational development of project managers has entailed the partial redefinition of project management as a crucial business competence which secures timely, efficient and effective accomplishment of defined goals in challenging environments. This process of ‘projectification’ (evocative of the imperialistic tendencies of established professions) is an example of how a professional project inevitably begins with the need to create a stable market for a service (Larson, 1977; Macdonald, 1995) then continues by establishing a strong link between an occupation’s cognitive base and areas of practice which it seeks to institutionalise. Hodgson documents the efforts made by the members of this occupation through its professional associations to achieve closure on its chosen occupational domain.

The experience of public sector organisational professions

The second group of organisational professions is dependent on public sector organisations. Professionals in teaching, social work, nursing and (in the UK) medicine, typically find
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employment in state organisations. Most of these professions can trace their beginnings in the nineteenth century. However, the rise of the modern welfare state in the twentieth century, which these professionals helped to design, is where they began to organise themselves most effectively. By the use of professional associations, qualifications and informal closure in the workplace, these groups have systematically enhanced their status and earnings. However, these professions are highly dependent on the state for employment and careers, and so, with the recent reduction of state support for welfare, they are suffering accordingly.

Macdonald has referred to the ‘regulative bargain’ between professional occupations and the state (1995). In accord with this, Johnson defined professionals employed by the state as in a situation where ‘the state intervenes in the relationship between practitioner and client to define needs and/or the manner in which such needs are catered for’ (1972, p. 77). Historically, professionals in public services provided selective support to citizens on behalf of the state. Thus it is perhaps more accurate to say these professions intruded themselves between the state and the potential recipients of state benefits, defining both their needs and allowable types of provision. Here organisational professions exchange skilled work with career prospects in return for a degree of autonomy in service delivery. As well as a high degree of freedom to organise services, these occupations were granted ‘structurally determined privileges’ (Cousins, 1987, p. 106), such as employment security and the right to regulate their own education and conduct in a manner something like the collegiate professions (Flynn, 1999).

Many note that welfare-state organisations were extensively colonised by professionals over much of the last century (Laffin, 1998), but such accounts are apt to understate the extent of the symbiosis between public sector professions and emergent public sector services. Public sector organisations evolved alongside the development of occupations providing skilled labour and there was mutual adaptation. Indeed, until the late 1970s, there was a substantial degree of consensus about the inevitability of professional self-regulation in the public sector, and professionals exclusively controlled these organisations (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Certainly, control of welfare organisations by professionals did not involve much directive management. Managers were mostly drawn from the ranks of the professionals themselves and their main task was ensuring service standards whilst defending practitioner autonomy (Ackroyd et al., 1989, p. 613).

Thus, in these circumstances, it seems unlikely that much radical change would originate from service providers or be automatically produced by the organisational field, as institutional theory suggests is likely. After 1980, rather abruptly in historical terms, through legislation and administrative directives, government began to impose what is called new public management (NPM) on public sector services, and this had a direct impact on the work of professionals. Given the existing regulatory bargain, NPM involved the revocation of existing arrangements and provoked resistance. One policy aimed directly at eroding professional power involves the use of unqualified personnel – nursing and teaching assistants, for example – for the provision of services. The response of professional groups to NPM has been variable. One study showed that the stronger a professional organisation was, the more concerted its opposition to NPM was also (Kirkpatrick et al., 2005). However, almost everywhere, professions have been weakened by NPM.

2.1.3 The rise of new or corporate professions

Around the turn of the twentieth century, there was a period of innovation in business-related occupations, especially in the UK and USA. These ranged from advertising and marketing, to public relations and information and systems analysts. Amongst these occupations, management consultants are the most prestigious and most analysed. Today, the status and income of many of these occupations is high. Leading management consultancy firms challenge the status and
rewards of the heights of the traditional professions. It is the occupation of choice for graduates from the best universities. And yet key features of traditional professionalism are largely absent from these new occupations. There were the beginnings of attempts to form professional associations when the first management consultancies were formed, but they are still not highly developed. There is little interest shown by consultants or the owners of consultancy firms in affirming qualifications as a guarantee of service quality, or in acquiring other features of professional organisation. The profit-making effectiveness of these occupations is the main plank of their rhetoric and preferred discourses.

The question of why new expert occupations did not adopt traditional professional strategies more fully or press for their advantages is open. The literature has emphasised such factors as the difficulty of the routinisation and commodification of consultants’ expertise, the challenge of establishing reliability and legitimacy of consultants’ knowledge, the uniqueness of business services and the evolving nature of clients’ needs. These features supposedly make it difficult to represent this knowledge as similar to that of established professions (Clark and Fincham, 2002). Alternatively, the extent of the differences between the consultants’ knowledge base and that of traditional professions may be exaggerated. The suggestion that there is something intrinsic to the knowledge used in consultancy that makes it unlike other types of knowledge is not defensible. We should recall that many professions were regarded at earlier points in history as having fragmented and elusive knowledge (Kipping et al., 2006). A formalised body of knowledge is as much a result of a successful professionalisation project as it is a prerequisite for one.

Almost no new business-services occupations have made serious moves to adopt the procedures and policies of the professions, so they pose an interesting puzzle. These occupations probably should not be considered professions, so widely do they depart from the traditional practices and forms of organisation.

3 Remaining issues and controversies

Five approaches to the professions have been distinguished here. Of these, the trait approach does not have enough substance to be considered a separate theory. Discourse analysis has serious intellectual provenance and can be construed as a new perspective. On the other hand, findings from this approach can be considered as giving emphasis to aspects of professional practice substantially overlooked hitherto. Insights here bring new depth to the understanding of professional practices, which are not incompatible with other major approaches such as institutionalism and conflict theory. Moreover, institutionalism is a redirection of the holistic and functionalist mode of theorising. Given these points, it can be argued there are actually only two main types of theorising about the professions. These are functionalism/institutionalism and conflict theory. Even these are less different than might be imagined.

Both the major approaches to the professions envisaged here involve similar conceptions of their subject matter, recognising different empirical levels. Both recognise the motivations and outlook of professionals and professional occupations. Both see outlooks and orientations as emerging and operating within broader relationships and structures comprising the organisational field (similar organisations), the system of the professions (the set professional occupations (Abbott, 1988)), the institutional field (the variety of organisations with which professions have to deal). What differs is mostly the way in which accounts of particular professions and the changes affecting them are conceived and assembled to propose explanations of what is happening. Institutionalism relies heavily on the putative characteristics of organisational fields and other collective levels as the basis for accounting for similarity of attitudes of professionals, continuity in the form of professional organisations and the functionality of professions. Conflict
Sociological and organisational theories

Theorists see the motivations of professions as self-interested, and, although their conceptions are shaped by their understanding of organisational and other fields, the actual properties of fields are emergent from the activities of groups and are strongly shaped by powerful actors. They see the big battalions in the economy and polity as key, being capable of influencing and even directing what happens at the level of the organisational field. Thus fields usually reflect historic compromises between groups and are as likely to be dysfunctional as functional.

Differences between contemporary theorists are clearly seen in accounts of change. For institutionalists, the need for change arises from the environment and is met by innovation amongst the professionals and professional firms that are more insightful and enterprising. Some groups initiate change, but it is largely consensual. Innovation is creative, functional and oriented towards the interests and values of the wider community as well as of the instigators. The alternative conflict view conceives of groups defensively or opportunistically in pursuit of their own interests, and generally beneficial outcomes when they occur are accidental. There is much inertia in the system. However, change occurs in response to external opportunities and threats, usually resulting from the activities of politically and economically powerful groups operating in the general institutional field. Change is not so much ‘required by the environment’ but is the result of actions by businesses and/or the state which threaten or give opportunities to the professions. Reactions of professional organisations and changed interactions between them and other groups do not turn out precisely as any one group plans, and potentially dysfunctional outcomes at the levels of professional and institutional fields are possible. Thus the system of professions is the outcome of diverse, defensive and self-serving motivations of particular occupations pursued over time. What has emerged is an imbricated system of professions with much duplication and overlapping. What makes it valuable is precisely what Durkheim averred a century ago: it is a diffuse locus of power providing a counterweight to the big battalions in the economy and polity.

Contemporary understanding of the professions often lacks sufficient appreciation of the historical depth of the processes of development in the manner brought out by Durkheim and Weber. It is difficult to explain the development of the professions without reference to the institutional context at the time of formation, as well as in the present. The collegiate structure, with decentralised power and lack of single executive heads, comes down to us from the original professions, which developed in a period of autocratic kingly power. The organisational professions could not have emerged to the extent they have without the complicity of business and the deals struck between them. Public sector organisational professions can only have grown given the formation of the welfare state, and they are now under severe pressure because this arrangement is being renegotiated or withdrawn (Kirkpatrick et al., 2005).

This analysis has the professions in Britain and North America as its primary points of reference. Application to other contexts will require reference to the organisational forms and properties of the new context. How professionals have conceived their professional development projects and negotiated their way between the interests of business organisations, community interests and the state will explain much about any system of the professions under scrutiny. A key difference from those found in continental Europe, for example, is the extent of state sponsorship and protection of professions, which is in contrast to the limited concern in Britain and America (Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990).

4 Conclusion: limits to professionalisation and the demise of professional society

Whatever theoretical view is taken, it is difficult to conclude that professions are as important as they were even a few decades ago. Only a few traditional professions are thriving, and then
arguably only because of buoyant markets for the services they offer. Indeed, the leading organisations of these types are a very few huge firms very unlike the relatively small partnerships of the past. Amongst organisational professions there are many signs of weakness. Some of those operating mainly in the private sector are in rapid numerical decline, whilst those in the public sector are having their autonomy reduced and freedom of action encroached upon by the new policies of the state. There is also the rise of new forms of expert occupations, corporate professions that have few of the attributes of traditional professions. If they are professions, and there must be doubt about the matter, their organisation and contractual position are far removed from traditional professions. Despite high status, good earnings and social importance, the most recently formed expert occupations seem to be largely free of the impulse to professionalise. They are new forms of private corporation as much as they are occupations. In sum, there is much to support the view that the professions are in decline.

Not so long ago some commentators (Freidson, 2001; Perkin, 1989, 1996) argued that professions were becoming more influential in modern society. The idea was that their practices embody a distinct mode of organising and logic, which were supposedly becoming increasingly important. Perkin (1989) took the idea furthest, referring to the rise of ‘professional society’ in England after 1880 and developing extensively in the twentieth century. Later he argued that, in several leading powers in the world, professional elites were taking a leading role in decision-making and social development (1996). That professions and systems of professions embody an alternative logic to entrepreneurship and administration, for example, is undoubtedly correct. But with the benefit of only a short period of hindsight, it seems clear that these authors over-emphasised the extent of the growth of professions and their influence. In the recent past, there is more evidence for the development of market ideas and their domination of decision-making and organising, and, with this, acute challenges have been offered to professionalism as a mode of organisation.

References


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