

Historical perspectives on professionalism

1. Introduction

In September 1973 the Brussels Sheraton Hotel was the location for the third international conference on corporate planning. Among the delegates, uncertainty was in the air. Was corporate planning the efficient secret of leading-edge global businesses? Would the demand for their services from the world's leading companies be sustained, or was corporate planning in peril of being de-mystified and of reverting to a line management task? The keynote speaker was Dr Warren Bennis, who, from his base at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1960s, had conducted pioneering research into corporate leadership and the management of change. On the matter of whether corporate planning is a profession, Bennis was clear: 'The less said about it the better. No secure profession has sessions on whether it is a profession' (reported in *The Times*, 24 September 1973: 20).

It seems unlikely that application of historical perspectives will definitively settle arguments about whether particular occupations are professions. Studying the past can, however, shed light upon the contested nature of such terms as profession, professional and professionalism, and about continuities and change over time. In that spirit, the remainder of this chapter is divided into four parts. The next section examines the rise of the professional over time, focusing especially on the so-called classical or learned professions. This is followed by an examination how the concepts of professionalism and professionalization have been approached by sociologists, historians and professionals themselves. While noting the formation of new professional groups, it is argued that the classical professions maintained their leading market position. There follows a discussion of how professionalization has been influenced by interactions between amateurs and professionals. Current concerns about the 'cult of the amateur' are contrasted with past anxieties about the dangers of professionalism. The concluding section notes the democratization of professionalism over time, but also tentatively asks whether this has been at the expense of intellectual leadership.

2. The rise of the professional

The concept of the specialist professional is identifiable from the Middle Ages, with churchmen, educated in cathedral schools, being the most prominent group. As European monarchs and overlords consolidated their positions, physicians and surgeons attended to their personal health, while jurists and bureaucrats facilitated the development of the modern state. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, 'governance [in Europe] was becoming the province of the bureaucrat and the professional' (Given 1997: 91). As practices of diplomacy developed, the position of ambassador emerged as a further profession, and, underpinning all these arrangements, retained 'professional' armies maintained the social order. There were other specialists appointed to the courts of medieval Europe, too: cooks, jongleurs, minstrels and woodsmen, for example. For the masses, a barber, supplementing his normal work of trimming hair and shaving beards, often performed surgical procedures and teeth extractions. Other 'semi-professionals' included practitioners of folk medicine and midwives (Singman 1999: 56).

A select group of Italian and French universities played the leading role in shaping the so-called classical professions of medicine, law and theology. The University of

Salerno was founded in the ninth century by four masters (according to legend) - Helinus the Jew, Pontus the Greek, Adela the Arab, and Salernus the Roman - whose personal backgrounds provided the preconditions for its success in attracting students from a wide range of countries and cultures (Buck 1917: 244). Similarly, the prominence of the University of Montpellier in the field of medicine from the thirteenth century was attributed to the fusion of Latin, Greek, Arab and Hebrew medical traditions. Meanwhile, the University of Bologna, founded in 1088, had become the leading centre for the education and training of lawyers, and the University of Paris, founded in the twelfth century, specialized in theological study. High-level studies in the medieval English universities of Oxford and Cambridge privileged these areas too, though with canon law and civil law based in separate faculties (Aldrich 1996: 27). This medieval association in the West between the learned professions, the Church and the university emphasized the distinction between professional elites and traders and artisans. The latter groups acquired their practical skills through apprenticeships, while a liberal university education, with teaching and study in Latin, was for gentlemen professionals (Larson 1967: 4).

In Britain, it was centuries before this elite categorization of professionals was challenged, though subdivisions emerged. The English essayist, Joseph Addison, son of the dean of Lichfield, was sceptical about whether the specialist sub-branches of the professions were necessary, wondering how many country curates could have made a greater contribution and gained more personal fulfilment if they had been guided towards a career in trade or commerce. In 1711 he argued in *The Spectator* that 'the three great professions of divinity, law and physic' were 'over-burdened with practitioners', citing the inflation of honours within the church, mocking lawyers who never practised at the bar and those who 'frequent the playhouse more than Westminster-hall, and are seen in all public assemblies, except in a court of justice'. Within the field of medicine, Addison argued, there were 'innumerable retainers to physic, who, for want of other patients, amuse themselves with the stifling of cats in an air-pump, cutting up dogs alive, or impaling insects upon the point of a needle for microscopical observations; besides those that are employed in the gathering of weeds, and the chase of butterflies: not to mention the cockleshell-merchants and spider-catchers' (Addison, 1711).

By the mid-nineteenth century more significant changes were underway to broaden the range of professional groups across Western Europe and North America. Commenting on British developments in this period, Noel Annan wrote:

Not only were the old professions expanding to include attorneys and apothecaries, but the establishment in 1828 of the Institution of Civil Engineers to further 'the art of directing the Great Sources of Power in Nature for the use and convenience of mankind' marked the rise of a new kind of professional man. Members of these intellectual families became the new professional civil servants at a time when government had become too complicated and technical to be handled by the ruling class and their dependents. They became school inspectors or took posts in the museums or were appointed secretaries of philanthropic societies; or they edited or wrote for the periodicals or entered publishing houses; or, as journalists ceased to be hacks scribbling in Grub Street, they joined the staff of *The Times*. Thus they gradually spread over the length and breadth

of English intellectual life, criticising the assumptions of the ruling class above them and forming the opinions of the upper middle class to which they belonged. (Annan 1999: 10-11).

Annan's own particular interest was the emergence of the secular university academic, effectively a new profession in Britain, as suggested by the title of Engel's 1983 book *From Clergyman to Don*. The professionalization of higher education was a feature of many other countries in this period, too. In France, academic posts rose from about 570 in 1865 to 2,200 in 1919, and in Germany from 1,504 to 3,838 during the period 1873 to 1910. In most countries, professors and other academics were civil servants, with career opportunities for the finest scholars to progress to positions in the most prestigious universities, such as Paris or Vienna. While this was not the case for Oxford and Cambridge, the founding of new civic universities in the late-nineteenth century enabled Oxbridge academics to take up new posts elsewhere, kick-starting the job market in this profession (Anderson 2004: 137). A range of more specialized university institutions also emerged, driven by the forces of meritocracy, urbanization, industrialization, imperialism, modernization and scientific rationality. The first modern business school, the *École Supérieure de Commerce de Paris*, was founded in 1819, providing a model for later American institutions, including the Harvard Business School and the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business. From 1910 and 1920, respectively, these institutions pioneered Master of Business Administration and doctoral business programmes. The *École Libre des Sciences Politiques*, again in Paris, and the London School of Economics, meanwhile, were founded in 1872 and 1895 to define and serve elite professionals in the arenas of politics, public administration and commerce. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology had originally been opened in 1861, and, to celebrate its move to a new campus in 1916, 'floats sponsored by the major corporations of early 20th-century America chugged down the streets of Nantasket Beach in honor of a university designed in large part to serve the technical needs of American industry' (Brint 1994: 8).

It was common for occupational groups seeking recognition as professions to mobilize under the umbrella of an association, institute or other body. The battle for acceptance was, in part, a matter of public relations, a point that was well understood by the American journalists who founded *Editor & Publisher* in 1901. This was not to be a trade magazine, but rather a *professional* magazine. From the outset, *Editor & Publisher* 'supported such emerging professionalizing agents as journalism schools, professional organizations, and ethics codes' (Cronin 1993: 235). Seeking the public's trust, it promoted political independence, accuracy, fair play and even, as a 1912 editorial sought, the licensing of journalists:

No one is allowed to practice medicine unless he possesses a diploma certifying that he has completed the course of study proscribed by a reputable medical college; no one can practice law unless he has been admitted to the bar after a searching examination; but anybody can engage in the practice of journalism without preparation and therefore without experience of any kind. (quoted in *ibid.*: 235).

On the other side of the world, journalists were, together with doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers and professors, officially identified as elite professionals by

the Chinese Guomindang in 1929, and the Shanghai Journalists Association was subsequently to play a key part in transforming the image of this group from that of 'literary men' to professionals. Until 1929 there had, in fact, been no Chinese word to distinguish 'profession' from 'occupation' (Xu 2001: 2, 179).

3. Professionalism and professionalization

In *The Acquisitive Society* (1920), the British Socialist intellectual, R.H. Tawney, differentiated between industry and a profession. Industry, he argued, was principally concerned with providing returns to shareholders, but the measure of professionals' success 'is the service which they perform, not the gains which they amass':

They may, as in the case of a successful doctor, grow rich; but the meaning of their profession, both for themselves and for the public, is not that they make money but that they make health, or safety, or knowledge, or good government or good law. They depend on it for their income, but they do not consider that any conduct which increases their income is on that account good. . . .

So, if they are doctors, they recognize that there are certain kinds of conduct which cannot be practised, however large the fee offered for them, because they are unprofessional; if scholars and teachers, that it is wrong to make money by deliberately deceiving the public . . . ; if judges or public servants, that they must not increase their incomes by selling justice for money; if soldiers, that the service comes first, and their private inclinations, even the reasonable preference of life to death, second. Every country has its traitors, every army its deserters, and every profession its blacklegs. To idealize the professional spirit would be very absurd; it has its sordid side, and, if it is to be fostered in industry, safeguards will be needed to check its excesses. But there is all the difference between maintaining a standard which is occasionally abandoned, and affirming as the central truth of existence that there is no standard to maintain. (Tawney 1920: 94-5).

From the 1930s, the notion of a profession became subjected to more systematic analyses. In a seminal text focusing on the British experience, Carr-Saunders and Wilson stopped short of providing a definition, but advised that the distinguishing mark of a professional is the possession of 'an intellectual technique acquired by special training', and that 'a profession can only be said to exist when there are bonds between the practitioners, and these bonds can take but one shape – that of the formal association (Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933: 200, 298). Other works pointed to a profession having at least some of the following traits: an extended and systematic preparation with an intellectual component taught in an institutional setting that upholds quality and competence; an expectation of its members to observe norms or codes of conduct; an emphasis upon service to others ahead of personal reward; an expectation that its members will demonstrate a high level of personal integrity. Later, academic opinion divided over the question of whether this type of 'attribute model', which defines professions in terms of what professionals do, and how they conduct themselves, is useful. As an alternative, some favoured a 'process model' that is more sensitive to the power exercised by professionals to legitimate their primacy (e.g. Parsons 1954; Greenwood 1988: 12-14).

Professionalization was variously viewed as a development that destroyed the integrity of Eastern European communism (Djilas 1955), a by-product of meritocratic educational sorting that produces a new ruling class (Young 1958) and, according to Larson's (1977) analysis of the United States and England, a capitalist instrument to take advantage of the university certification and legitimization for the purpose of exercising bourgeois social control. Belatedly, perhaps, historians have joined these debates. For example, taking a more charitable approach than Larson, Haber (1991) argued that the professional power accumulated in the late-nineteenth century by American lawyers, doctors and ministers of religion, as well as the newer groups of engineers and college professors, was exercised in a restrained, responsible and honourable manner, confirming these men to be the inheritors of the English gentry values. In relation Britain and Germany, the past 20 years have witnessed the publication of impressive studies of British and German professionalization by Perkin (1989), Cocks and Jaraus (1990), McClelland (1991) and Corfield (1995). This has not always been comfortable reading: in a brilliant and detailed analysis of the behaviour and practices of German lawyers, teachers and engineers in the first half of the twentieth century, Konrad Jaraus (1990) demonstrated how the most prominent associations to which these groups were affiliated publicly acclaimed Hitler's New Order. The explanation that professionals were simply caught unawares does not suffice, he maintains.

Two important points should be made at this juncture. The first is that the notion of trades stampeding to become recognized as professions in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries can be overplayed. An account of a 1936 conference of British drapers reported their pride in belonging to a trade, with its attendant emphasis upon customer care and satisfaction, rather than to a profession, though it was also noted that the area of retailing might, in time, be subject to professionization (*The Times*, 19 August 1936: 12). The second is that, beyond the classical fields of medicine, the law and the church, and despite the views that the mechanical, social and business 'revolutions' of the past 150 years professionalized groups as diverse as engineers and scientists, nurses, teachers, corporate planners and personnel managers, such claims have often been subject to comparative status differentiation. Using a contemporary scenario, those trained as doctors, nurses and paramedics are each likely to view themselves as dedicated professionals - indeed, each may have experienced a university education - but few would dispute that doctors are *primas inter pares*.

Industrial sociology may point here to the need for a more sophisticated typology, acknowledging proto professionals and paraprofessionals, as well as more established professional groups. The modern social worker, a role which has developed out of a Western voluntary tradition, often in the past undertaken by feminist activists seeking to provide relief, education, training and hope for the least-advantaged members of society, presents an interesting case. In the United States of America Abraham Flexner posed the question 'Is social work a profession?' (1915) some 45 years before a 1960 British House of Lords debate about the welfare state. In this debate, Lord Pakenham - shortly to become the Earl of Longford - conceded that a qualification in social work could never be on the same footing as one in law, theology or accountancy, though he did see an analogy between training as a social worker and training as a teacher (*The Times*, 18 February 1960: 17). In similar vein, Burton R. Clark confirmed in 1962 that such professions as agriculture, business administration,

dentistry, education, engineering, forestry, librarianship, nursing, optometry, pharmacy, public health and social welfare were 'struggling up the slope' and still trailing behind law and medicine (Clark 1962: 82-3). In the instance of business management, even now apparently still struggling up the slope, one recent interpretation maintains that its failure to obtain undisputed recognition as a profession 'should not be seen as an outcome of it being "the wrong kind of knowledge"', but rather consequence of the classical professions achieving monopolistic closure (Grey 2004: 51).

4. Amateurism and professionalism

In his best-selling *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), Andrew Keen points to various examples of how 'Web 2.0' technologies have made it possible for ordinary people – 'amateurs' – to create blogs, share homemade videos, post Web pages, amend Wikipedia pages and so forth. In the United Kingdom, the growth of online banking and insurance and the showcasing of homes for sale has led to the partial withdrawal of some financial institutions and estate agents from the high street. More tellingly, perhaps, major record labels, including EMI, have issued profits warnings and announced staff redundancies in consequence of young people preferring to download music – often illegally – from the Web, rather than purchase CDs. Video and DVD rental stores are also said to be feeling the pinch as television and movie downloads have burgeoned. If amateurs are the winners, now ruling the Internet and undermining the culture and the economy, it follows that professionals – if it is accepted that those who work in financial services, retail stores, marketing executives and so on *are* professionals – are the losers.

Historically, this kind of discourse, emphasising the creeping threat of amateurs undermining professionals and professionalism is fascinating. It presents a 180-degree contrast to the situation of century ago, and even more recently, when the concept of professionalism was viewed less benignly. Elizabeth Keeney has shown how, in the United States, amateur botanists, especially in Boston and New York, were upset when academics began to found societies which restricted membership to professionals, ending a period of peaceful and productive co-existence (Keeney 1992: 37). Similarly, in 1891, Richard Norman Shaw, architect of the original Scotland Yard and of several theatres in London's West End, arguably the finest British-born architect of all time, protested that the Royal Institute of British Architects was influenced too much by men of business. These sinister forces, he maintained, were seeking 'to transform architecture from an art into a close profession by the introduction of examinations and diplomas' (letter, *The Times*, 11 November 1891: 4).

Nowhere was the threat of professionalism felt more keenly than in the area of sport. During its first eleven years, from 1872, the English Football Association Challenge Cup was won by Wanderers (five times), Old Etonians (twice), Clapham Rovers, Old Carthusians, Oxford University and the Royal Engineers. These were amateur teams of unpaid ex-public school players, though many of these men were professionals in another walk of life. None of these teams reached the Cup Final again. Professional teams – initially Aston Villa, Blackburn Rovers, Preston North End and West Bromwich Albion – triumphed from 1883 and new controversies came to the fore about whether the introduction of player transfer fees, gate money, football pools and other forms of betting were destroying the game. Resisting the drift towards professionalization, two proudly amateur clubs, Corinth and Casuals, were founded

by alumni of the major round ball-playing schools, later combining as Corinthian-Casuals. The Corinthians initially refused to enter competitions or to take penalties, embodying the public school ethos that 'the whole code of life is to play the game, that cheating is against the code, but that professionalism puts a man outside the code altogether' (ibid., 31 December 1929: 10; Taylor 2006).

Controversy reigned in other sports, too. Jim Thorpe, the Native American winner of the decathlon and pentathlon gold medals at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics was subsequently stripped of the medals when it emerged that, three years earlier, he had played minor league baseball in South Carolina, for which he had received small payments (Bruchac 2006). As in association football, the engagement of 'hired men' divided English county cricket and, from the late 1870s, there were annual objections to the participation, and domination, of American 'amateur professional' rowers in the Henley Regatta (e.g. *New York Times*, 22 June 1879: 2). In 1901 Edmond Warre, Headmaster of Eton College, demanded the preservation of amateur oarsmanship from 'the deadly inroad of professionalism' (letter, *The Times*, 9 July 1901: 12).

The absence of professionalism in the British army officer class, it was widely maintained, was responsible for military catastrophes during the Boer War (ibid., 26 August 1903, p. 4). Similarly, in business, public-school boys were advised that they would have to abandon the amateurism that characterized those institutions if they were to succeed (ibid., 31 December 1929: 10). In the field of music, professionalism was viewed more positively by amateurs as the means of raising the standard of local choral and orchestral performance. Professionals were also encouraged to see benefits in working with, and developing, the amateurs who formed the nucleus of concert audiences (Shera 1939; Kaplan 1954). Indeed, this is an instance where professionals – composers, in particular – were beholden to amateurs to popularize their outputs. A witty poem, attributed to Mendelssohn, captured the composers' dilemma thus:

If composers earnest are,
Then we go to sleep;
If they take a lively style,
Then we vote them cheap;
If the composition's long,
Then its length we're fearing;
If the writer makes it short,
'Tisn't worth the hearing.
If the work is plain and clear,
Play it to some child;
If its style should deeper be,
Ah, the fellow's wild;
Let a man do as he will,
Still the critics fight;
Therefore let him please himself,
If he would do right. (quoted in Kaplan 1954: 26-7).

New professionals in certain other areas moved decisively during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries against the amateurs, hobbyists and dilettanti, though Stebbins (1992) and – using archaeology as a case study - Taylor (1995) have argued that spaces remained for amateurs to pursue 'serious leisure' in partnership with

professionals. A major study of American medical practice has shown how this field became more scientific, professional and ethical (Warner 1986), a process that advanced orthodox medical professionals at the expense of practitioners – dismissed as charlatans and 'quacks' - of alternative therapies, including homeopathy, osteopathy and acupuncture. According to Fournier (2002), professional market closure continues to impede the efforts of aromatherapists to gain legitimacy.

Unevenness and national variations accompanied the drive towards professionalization in school teaching. In parts of Europe, teachers acquired civil servant status and entitlements to such professional benefits as pensions, but progress was impeded by the view – found in many countries - that 'good teachers are born and not made'. Where formal teacher training was endorsed, it was often maintained (and still is by some) that training 'on the job', following an apprenticeship model, is more suitable than programmes dependent upon university certification (see Herbst 1989; Robinson 2004). When, during the Second World War, it was decided that England and Wales should introduce an emergency training programme for teachers from the armed forces, lasting for one year rather than the normal two, Sir Ernest Graham-Little, Member of Parliament for the University of London, reasonably took the view that this represented a dilution that would never be asked of, or be acceptable to, the classical professions (letter, *Education*, 15 March 1946: 470). In more recent times, teachers have felt more assured, though rarely complacent, about their professional credentials. Donald Schön's (1983) concept of the 'reflective practitioner' had a special appeal to teachers and teacher educators, while such works as Hoyle and John (1995) and Whitty (2002) have conceptualised and theorized the professional nature of teachers' work, while also identifying overlapping and sometimes-competing discourses about the nature of professionalism and 'professionalism'.

5. Conclusion

Disappointingly, perhaps, the application of historical perspectives confirms professionalism to be an artificial construct, with ever-changing and always-contested definitions and traits. In times of late or post modernity, some may wish to argue that we can all – dog-walkers and landscape gardeners no less than solicitors and archbishops - be professionals if we want to be professionals, and if we conduct ourselves in a manner that seems to be professional.

The period since about 1870 might be regarded as the long century of the professional. Since that time, the description has come to be applied not just to doctors, lawyers and clerics, but also to those who make their living as academics, accountants, investment bankers and librarians, among others. Recent additions might potentially include comedians, data analysts, directors of communication, personal trainers and Web designers. Professionals may also be found working in various capacities for charitable and non-governmental organizations. It remains the case, however, as Warren Bennis suggested 35 years ago, that only some professions – 49, at present for the purposes of a United Kingdom passport application countersignature - are 'secure', endowed with the requisite amount of social capital.

Recent efforts to define the modern professional have tended only to reinforce the plurality of understandings and interest groups. Brint's (2004) thesis, which argues that there has been a significant shift from *social trust* professionalism towards *expert* professionalism, is compelling, but does not fully capture the tensions between the

ideal image of the modern professional (e.g. client-focused, independent, respectable, well rewarded, influential) and what is sometimes the reality (e.g. overwhelmed by paperwork, in peril of litigation, overworked, stressed). Status anxiety, to use Alain de Botton's (2004) term, seems now to have caught up with the group that once seemed exempt from it. Moreover, some recent writers have argued that the democratization of the professions has diminished the intellectual leadership that professionals once provided (e.g. Said, 1994; Furedi, 2004). For the historian, this is certainly an area worth pursuing.

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