

Professionalism Today

Professions, professionals and professionalism are important themes for anyone interested in work. In his analysis of modern societies, historian Harold Perkin chose the word 'professional' to capture their essence (1989). This conveys an immediate impression of the centrality of professionals in the operation of contemporary societies; after all, professionals '*heal our bodies, measure our profits and save our souls*' (Abbott, 1988). Ability to solve these crucial individual and societal problems has guaranteed significant privileges (monopolies, restrictive arrangements, self regulation) and rewards (high income, status, discretion); privileges and rewards which have often been criticised and resisted in other areas of the economy, but, which, in this context, are justified and accepted through rhetorics of quality and public interest. This explains the material and symbolical appeal of professional careers and has transformed professionalization (the processes through which occupations accomplish or at least claim professional status) into a reliable strategy for upward mobility and social advancement; thus fuelling over the years the steady expansion of the system of the professions (Larson, 1977). Indeed, throughout most of the 20th century, the professionalization of everyone was thought to be a credible prognosis for the future of work (Wilensky, 1964).

The study of professions is particularly relevant today. Historically, professionalism has been the standard organisational solution for the production and delivery of expertise. Yet a series of broader developments ultimately connected with the radical reworking of the relationship between markets and state, has vigorously shaken its institutional and ideological scaffolding whilst advancing the competing logics of entrepreneurship, managerialism and consumerism (Hanlon, 1997; 1998). In particular, professions have been the targets of sustained deregulatory efforts on behalf of consecutive neo-liberal administrations; professionals have been exposed in the workplace to the increasing routinisation, rationalisation and commoditisation of their work and of their expertise; finally, and perhaps most importantly, professionalism, as a distinct occupational ideology and work-organisation method, has been increasingly demystified and discredited in the wider political economy (Reed, 1996). In this context, there is strong impression that the trajectory of change for the professions is, inevitably, one of long-term decline. Indeed, professionalism has lost its historical stronghold on expert services, as new forms of knowledge-based occupations are shunning traditional recipes, centred on occupational closure, and developing more entrepreneurial and managerial modes of organisation and operation (Reed, 1996; Muzio et al, 2007).

There is no doubt that the professions are confronted by considerable challenges but it is also true that they are well placed to manage such challenges and that they have, historically, proven to be particularly flexible and resilient (Ackroyd, 1996). In particular, they have succeeded to develop new patterns of organization and new modes of operation which are more appropriate for the new ideological and institutional climate. This may have involved the sacrifice of some long held values, practices and arrangements but have allowed the profession to boost profit levels and to defend traditional privileges and rewards. These developments include: globalization and the pursuit of new markets, organizational consolidation, the formalization and elongation of professional hierarchies, the feminisation of the workforce, and an increasing attention to practice management and development

(Ackroyd and Muzio, 2007; Bolton and Muzio, 2007; Brock et al, 1999). Of course, the impact of such developments has been highly uneven. In particular, there seems to be a growing divide between a (predominately male) relatively shrinking professional elite, which controls the key positions in the professional associations and leading practices, and a rapidly expanding cohort of (predominately female) rank and file professional workers, who are exposed to increasing levels of managerial scrutiny and competition in unstable markets (Freidson 2001). Indeed, internal polarisation rather than de-professionalisation or managerialisation, may be the best descriptor for the status of contemporary professionalism.

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