CHAPTER TWO

THE SITUATION ON THE CONTINENT

As noted in the previous chapter, continental neo-traditionalists are feeling their way as they move at least somewhat beyond Anglo-American revisionism. They are returning inadvertently to some cultural issues which Parsons had raised in the sociology of professions even as they retain a negative impression of functionalism. Continental neo-traditionalists are nonetheless taking their bearings, as did Parsons, from basic epistemological principles. Only definitional integrity can reveal when significant historical and cross-national occupational developments are instances of professionalism. By contrast, a lack of definitional integrity obscures this entire issue. At the same time, continental neo-traditionalists operate consistently with received wisdom, as did both functionalists and revisionists earlier. They unreflectively read back into history, to the early or mid-nineteenth century, the trajectory of the two seemingly self-evident modern exemplars of professionalization, first law and then medicine.

Proceeding epistemologically, continental neo-traditionalists operate on the assumption that in the sociological subfield of professions, as in others such as family, only when qualities constitutive of the object of study can be presented in ideal-typical terms can a subfield attain truly cumulative historical and cross-national findings. The problem, of course, is that the two subfields just noted have notoriously resisted this conceptual step: there is no ideal type of profession, and there is no ideal type of family.

Neo-traditionalists are fully aware of this, but they are less aware of Parsons’ point in response. On the same epistemological grounds, Parsons insisted, correctly, that in the absence of an ideal type only a more abstract conceptual grounding, invariant analytical distinctions, can permit sociologists to generalize in cumulative ways from particular

---

1 This chapter is adapted from an article in Current Sociology titled “Continental Sociology of Professions Today: Conceptual Contributions.” I adapt it here only for its context as a second chapter rather than as a free-standing article. Thus, I shorten or expand its content in places were necessary; central theses are unchanged.
cases. Short of following Parsons and taking an analytical turn, neo-traditionalists appreciate that there is only one other credible option at a conceptual level in the sociology of professions today. Sociologists can operate with typologies of middle class occupations which happen to secure general acceptance today but remain relativist at a conceptual level. Such typologies lack conceptual grounding against relativism, and thus cannot possibly resist changing fads of academic thinking.

1. Today’s New Start on the Continent

In 1990 Michael Burrage, Konrad Jarausch and Hannes Siegrist proposed their multi-part definition of professions and professionalism, which we presented at the end of the previous chapter (at page 45). Drawn from earlier Anglo-American theories, they “broaden” this definition by taking into account more explicitly lessons learned from historical and cross-national cases of occupational upgrading on the Continent. The problem, however, is that their multi-part definition, like other definitions of professions today, no longer distinguishes professions from expert occupations or middle-class occupations on any basis, empirical or analytical, let alone on an invariant basis. This means the pool of cases of occupational upgrading from which the co-authors draw their empirical characteristics of professions and professionalism fully reflects the leniency or laxity of this conceptual point of departure. The cases are hardly confined to putatively self-evident instances of professionalism. The cases instead span instances of occupational upgrading by all sorts of occupations.

Accordingly, the empirical characteristics listed at the end of Chapter 1 fail to distinguish professions in particular and, in this regard, this listing is very similar to dozens of earlier listings by Anglo-American functionalists, during the first phase of the sociology of professions. One of the listing’s co-authors, Hannes Siegrist, has in fact called attention independently to its laxity by employing in his own publications, as he sees fit, different empirical characteristics of professions. For instance, in 1990, the same year in which the co-authored listing was published, Siegrist presented a related but nonetheless somewhat different listing of empirical characteristics of legal professionalization in Germany in particular. Here he calls attention to the attorney-client relationship, to the importance

---

2 For example, Torstendahl 1990a: 46–47.