SECTION III
A STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH
CHAPTER SIX

PROFESSIONS AND STRUCTURED SITUATIONS

Given our historical case, sociologists can no longer assume blithely, as they have until now, that professionalism originated in law, in London, sometime during the nineteenth century. Our case strips away this underpinning of the sociology of professions because it reveals an unambiguous instance of inadvertent professionalism in painting, on the continent, centuries earlier – at the zenith of the ancien régime. By challenging received wisdom so dramatically, our case not only advances our understanding of professionalism descriptively, or simply anecdotally. It also provides us with notable advantages over received wisdom in advancing the sociology of professions at conceptual and theoretical levels.

After all, our case casts in sharper relief than does any modern case of purposeful professionalism in the English-speaking world the structural qualities truly constitutive of professionalism as such. It accomplishes this by removing from view, as if in thought experiment, all extraneous accompanying variables of professionalism which are particular to English liberalism, to Anglo-American democratization or, for that matter, to Western modernity and then to industrialization more generally.

Indeed, our point in tracing invariant structural qualities of professionalism to the Paris visual Académie rather than taking our bearings from English law or any other occupation during the nineteenth century is to mine at conceptual and theoretical levels the many advantages of backdrop dissonance. It is far easier to discern invariant structures of professionalism when the socio-cultural and institutional backdrop cannot possibly be accommodated by received wisdom. Not only is a socio-cultural awareness of professions by contemporaries entirely absent from our backdrop – to say nothing of any ideology of purposeful professionalism. More generally, our backdrop is at once pre-industrial, socio-culturally aristocratic, institutionally clientelistic and politically autocratic.

In addition, because our case of professionalism unfolded on the continent, not in England, it simultaneously removes from play all