CHAPTER EIGHT

CONSEQUENCES OF PROFESSIONALISM, IMMEDIATE AND INSTITUTIONAL

We have finally reached the point in our discussion regarding the place and purpose of professions in civil society and the state where we can identify the consequences or externalities professionalism introduces structurally into the larger social order. Before doing so, however, it is instructive to recall how radically dissonant any such line of inquiry strikes proponents of received wisdom today in the sociology of professions on both sides of the Atlantic.

1. Disregarding Professionalism’s Social Consequences

Received wisdom belittles professions by portraying them as simply a type of status category in the occupational order and stratification system. By this understanding professions are no more significant socially or institutionally than thousands of other expert occupations and middle-class occupations. Professions are not distinctive socio-economically, and then, certainly, are hardly distinctive culturally and social psychologically or structurally. As a result, all consequences or externalities of professions, whatever these happen to be, are confined strictly to the occupational order and stratification system. After all, as a mere status category, professions are hardly capable of contributing more grandly in any way to “social order,” let alone of doing so uniquely among all other expert occupations and middle-class occupations.

Anglo-American revisionists initiated this disparaging reading of professionalism and its consequences during the late 1970s in direct reaction to Parsons’ expansive characterizations of professionalism's cultural and social-psychological consequences. Such revisionism had been adumbrated earlier, by Terence Johnson in 1972, but, to recall, he nonetheless retained something of Parsons’ cultural and social-psychological reading. Unlike Johnson, however, Parsons had gone much further. He also grandly attributed “social order” in the postwar United States in some large part to the prominence of professions in American civil society.
Parsons saw professions literally accounting for why the American social order was becoming more integrative (rather than controlling) and in addition more archetypal cross-nationally, as the most “advanced” democracy in the world. He went this far because he was convinced that dispersed professionals (somehow) typically share social psychologically a service orientation and also typically acknowledge in common more cognitively or dispassionately what he called “valued cultural patterns.” This way of thinking about professionalism and its consequences is what led Parsons, as we reviewed briefly in chapter 6, to emphasize the importance of professionals’ secondary socialization during lengthy periods of instruction and training.

Today, leading American revisionists are uncompromising in rejecting any attribution of social order, let alone of social integration, to professions. Randall Collins and Andrew Abbott in particular take particular umbrage at the attributions made by Parsons. They are convinced Parsons was utterly mistaken in approaching professions so expansively, with an eye to whether and how they contribute to social order. They disparage all such suggestions and lines of inquiry by asserting that Parsons’ very point of departure is anachronistic, an “Old World” fear of social breakdown which is dourly pre-war or, at best, a relic of the 1950s and early 1960s. Advanced, post-industrial societies, they say, are hardly likely to suffer the sorts of social dislocations characteristic of smokestack, industrializing societies, let alone breakdowns so severe as to yield the “mass society” feared by Marx, Weber and Durkheim and then also the first generation of the Frankfurt school (along with William Kornhauser in the United States). Accordingly, they ridicule Parsons’ characterizations of the significance socially or institutionally of professionals (or any other large groupings in civil society) putatively sharing “value orientations.” Such solidarity within the occupational order is hardly necessary, let alone capable somehow of stemming “contradictions of capitalism” which the theorists just noted had feared were systemic, thus fated.

Given this dismissal of the “problem of social order” as a credible orientation for theory and research in any sociology of professions, revisionists instead see a superior logic in approaching professions more narrowly. As Collins puts the matter, professions bear strictly and

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1 Collins 1990b; Abbott 1988,2002,2005. It is noteworthy that Magali Larson no longer goes this far, even as she similarly rejects Parsons’ particular approach to professionalism (Larson 1989,1990,1993).