What Defines a Professional Historian?  
A Historicizing Model

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Introduction

Why have scholars of nineteenth-century historiography long tended to approach their subject-matter through the prism of “professionalization”? Part of the attractiveness of this interpretative lens is, no doubt, its potential to examine nineteenth-century historians and their emerging “discipline” as a case study among others. If “professionalization” refers to a set of interrelated processes through which all professions, in and outside the academy, gradually mature, a study of professionalization among nineteenth-century historians allows for comparison across disciplinary boundaries. Also, it allows historians of historiography to draw on a rich body of professionalization theory, such as developed by Harold Wilensky and other organizational sociologists in the third quarter of the twentieth century.1 Arguably, however, this is only a partial explanation. At least as important it that “professionalization” is frequently used as synonymous or closely related to “scientification” (Verwissenschaftlichung), an actor’s category that featured prominently in the self-images of nineteenth-century historians. If such scholars as Georg Waitz in Germany, Gabriel Monod in France, and Lord Acton in England shared anything, it was a commitment to raising historical studies to the ranks of “science” (Wissenschaft) by setting high scholarly standards, by socializing students into an ethos of painstaking research, and by creating infrastructures

1 See, e.g., Harold L. Wilensky’s highly influential “The Professionalization of Everyone?”, The American Journal of Sociology, 70 (1964), 137–158.
for archival research and research dissemination. Given that most historians of nineteenth-century historical studies are, consciously or not, heirs to this tradition, it does not come as a surprise that many of them find it difficult not to reproduce such actor’s categories as “scientification” in their analysis of nineteenth-century historiography.2

Like all master narratives, however, “professionalization” turns out to be a problematic template as soon as scholars begin to zoom in and ask what exactly was involved in becoming a professional historian. Some nineteenth-century authors claimed that membership of the historical discipline amounted to using such “historical methods” as codified in Ernst Bernheim’s *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* (1889) and Charles-Victor Langlois’s and Charles Seignobos’s *Introduction aux études historiques* (1898). Does this imply, however, that those rejecting the concept of methods and/or the type of philosophical source criticism advocated under its banner did not count as “professionals”? Or does it suggest that different ideals of professionalization existed alongside each other, in the sense that historians committed to identifying patterns of cultural change (Karl Lamprecht) and historians advocating a rapprochement between historical inquiry and political science (Herbert Baxter Adams) held different ideals of what it meant to be a professional historian than those committed to methodological purity? But if that is the case, how meaningful then is the claim that nineteenth-century historiography underwent a process of professionalization?

The examples just given come from *The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism* by Rolf Torstendahl, emeritus professor of history at Uppsala University. The aim of this book, which largely consists of previously published book chapters and journal articles, is to challenge teleological narratives of professionalization by emphasizing the context-dependency of professional norms and standards. Focusing on late nineteenth and twentieth-century European historiography, with examples from Germany, France, Russia, and the Nordic countries in particular, Torstendahl examines different conceptions of “professionalism”, which sometimes greatly differed from each other, but frequently also overlapped, because of a shared commitment to historical methods. *The Rise and Propagation* is primarily a historical study, devoted to answering historical questions about the development of historical scholarship, although it contains a few philosophical asides, addresses a few long-standing philosophical problems, is not afraid of borrowing philosophical

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