

18. Good work and professional work

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Britain entered the twentieth century as an industrial society; it began the twenty-first as a professional one. The power and status of professional groups – in the private and then public sectors – have increased dramatically over the last hundred years. Some professions, largely those in the state sector, are now seen to be threatened by a combination of central government regulations and consumer expectations. But professional strength is still one of the dominant facts of our culture today, and any analysis of the future of professionalism must grapple with its history. Professional power is not waning, at least not yet. But the basis of that power is shifting; the balance between the defining characteristics of professional is altering, and must alter. Professionals are being led back to an older, richer definition of what it is that they ‘profess’ to offer the rest of us in exchange for their status. Ethics and impact will come to predominate over expertise and market capture in the definition of professional labour. Good work is what defines professionalism.

Professional life is intimately entwined with economic, social and political power. Professions form many of the main battalions in societal conflict: the protagonists in twenty-first-century power struggles are very much more likely to be competing professional groups (managers versus doctors, accountants versus regulators, civil servants versus journalists) than economically defined social classes. The (recent) history of society is the history of professional struggle.

As the social historian Harold Perkin points out, ecologies of power shaped by professions are more complex, and more attractive, than ‘a class society in the traditional sense of a binary model with a small ruling class exploiting a large underclass, but a collection of parallel hierarchies of unequal height, each with its own ladder of many rungs’.¹

In a professional society, status, power and income flow from demonstrable possession of human capital. As such, it is more meritocratic than one in which inherited wealth in the form of land or accumulated financial capital is the primary source of power – although, as Perkin points out, ‘merit’ is more easily acquired by some.

The ‘free’ market is of course highly professionalised. The rules and regulations necessary for capitalism have reinforced the power bases of accountants, bankers and lawyers, as well as spawning a whole range of new professions: human resources, risk management and training. Management itself has been steadily professionalised, with MBAs or other qualifications increasingly required for upward mobility.

Postwar social democracy created the conditions for a new burst of profession-building. Some professions, such as social work, were brought into existence by the welfare state. Many more saw a significant numerical expansion and increased power: civil servants, doctors, nurses, police officers and teachers. Increasingly, professionals were divided by their position in relation to the market and the state and also by their attitude to the role and scope of government. ‘The bifurcation of the professional ideal’, writes Perkin, ‘reflected the splitting of the professional class into two warring factions.’² Of course many professions crossed the public–private divide (everyone needs lawyers). But the two branches of the professional class have generally been at loggerheads, especially since 1979. Money is a good part of the struggle. Private sector professionals create wealth; public sector professionals spend it. Where then should resources be focused?

But this war, which has survived the Thatcherite period, has

obscured the features shared by professions in both spheres: an increasing emphasis on qualifications, tightening regulation and regimes of inspection and a high degree of control over the supply of services. Professions can define themselves, and the source of their power, in four principal ways.

First, by the erection of narrow gates of entry into the labour market for the provision of services. Formal qualifications are the principal mechanism by which the professions are able to control the supply of labour into their area of activity: PGCE, MD, LLB, ACCA ONE or Dip. Soc. Work. At the same time, of course, these qualifications provide assurance to the consumer that the professional has an idea of what they are doing. The basis of professional power here is an asymmetry in knowledge, skills and expertise between them and the user of their services. Much of this human capital is out of sight of the user – it is often unnecessary to know how the accountant tallied the books, or what the detail of company law is or the precise biochemical pathology of a disease. In this sense, professionalisation is simply a formalised version of the division of labour. The fact that their expertise lies in a ‘black box’, invisible to laypeople (and we are all laypeople now), becomes an issue when the application of expertise has a profound impact on individuals themselves. Health and education are obvious examples: Why do I need that test? Why are you teaching my child to read in that weird ‘phonic’ way?

On top of the formal entry gates, professions often erect informal defences at their occupational boundaries: lawyers and doctors love to use Latin, academics are partial to often unnecessary jargon, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has had a long history of requiring the right sort of accent for embassy cocktail parties. This second line of defence, resting on mystification, is declining in the light of greater public knowledge and a renewed push towards meritocracy. But the qualification gates are narrowing, and becoming more widespread. In a number of occupations, postgraduate qualifications or diplomas are becoming necessary, often as a result of tougher state regulation: childcare is a good example of an area of

work that is being professionalised in this way (notwithstanding the still sizeable gap between the UK and our European neighbours in this specific regard).

The second potential defining characteristic of a profession is the collective organisation of labour. Having established the qualifications required to trade, the next step is to act together to maximise the profession's political and economic leverage. Trade bodies act as often powerful voices for the interests of a profession. Some professions, such as teachers and hospital workers, act through trade unions – although these act as quasi-professional associations. But the greatest power is wielded not by unions but by associations, colleges and societies: the Law Society, Royal College of Nursing, Bar Association and British Medical Association. These bodies act not only for the economic and occupational interests of their members, but ostensibly also for the users of their services. (Inevitably the line is blurred.) As Perkin points out: 'Profession came to mean an occupation which so effectively controlled its labour market that it never had to behave like a trade union.'³ Because any individual who wishes to practise in these professions is usually obliged to join the relevant association, the professions have managed to operate something very close to a 'closed shop', long since abolished for everyone else. The power of professional associations is further enhanced when there is effectively a single employer to negotiate with, such as the NHS: monopoly meets monopsony.

The third defining characteristic of a profession is a set of shared values by which their work is conducted: a professional ethos. The distinguishing characteristic of the professional here is not their formal expertise, but their motivation. Here what makes the professional is not what they know, but *how* they work. In some occupations the professional ethic is explicit: the Hippocratic oath is the exemplar. But in most professions the ethic is informally accumulated over a long period of time, often based on unspoken assumptions on the part of both users and providers of services. Lawyers don't lie, nurses 'care' not just for the body but for the person, civil servants remain politically neutral. Needless to say there

is an abundance of exceptions to these ethical imperatives, but they cut against the grain. The attachment of ethical standards to certain positions is not restricted to paid work, or professions of course: when a woman lied about a car accident, and got some children in her care to lie on her behalf, it was a national story only because she was a scout leader.⁴ Who would be shocked if a politician, management consultant or advertising executive were found to have uttered an untruth?

The professional identifier of a shared ethic is older than the identifiers of qualification screening and occupational capture. The very term 'professional', in its original sense, carries a vocational, motivational import. Individuals entering religious orders were required to take an oath, to 'profess' their faith and commitment to their vocation and those entering other occupations were expected to 'declare publicly' (*profitieri*) both their skills and their character for the job. Professional ethics can conflict with self-interest, especially in a market economy. It may be better for the individual professional to undertake more work than necessary, prescribe a different drug, be economical with the truth. These are the moments when professional integrity is tested. But a general sense of trust that the members of a profession will act in accordance with its ethos is a vital component in its maintenance of social and economic status.

The final identifier of a professional is the impact of their work. This is most clearly the case with the provision of services, largely in the state sector. A teacher may have a PGCE, the National Union of Teachers may act effectively to secure her monopsonistic advantage, and she may have a strong motivation to equip the next generation for a fulfilling life. But she also has to succeed: the children in the classroom have to be educated. And in other professions, the same need for impact is clear: the patient is healed; the vulnerable family is supported. There is a transformative element to professional work. If the third characteristic is the 'how', this last defining feature is the 'what'. In the Nick Hornby novel, *How to be Good*, a GP is threatened by the apparent success of an untrained, hippy healer. She is struggling to see how she could define what he actually does. But she

realises that if she restricts herself to a simple description of impact, the problem disappears: he makes sick people better. In the old days, that is how people saw doctors. Now they are highly qualified, highly regulated experts operating in a specific, clearly demarcated occupational and institutional space. And health care is much the better for all this. But the final impact of their work is what matters most.

For most of the second half of the twentieth century professional status and authority was built on the first two identifiers – assessed expertise and occupational capture. Both of these are being eroded. The informational asymmetry between professional and citizen is being reduced by rising educational standards and the greater accessibility of information, especially on the internet. A patient can become more expert than most GPs on a specific condition after half an hour in front of their computer. Although the reduction of the informational advantage is greatest in taxpayer-funded services, it is occurring elsewhere too. I can download my own will and testament, or tenancy agreement. Spreadsheets, once the preserve of finance professionals, can be used with ease by every decently educated 15-year-old.

The growing knowledge and confidence of the users of professional services requires a profound shift in the nature of professional labour. Increasingly professionals will be expected not merely to provide a service, but to act in partnership with the user in the construction of a service: they will, in the new jargon, have to become ‘co-producers’. In some cases, such as the generalist GP, their specific knowledge may be limited, and even less than that of the user. But they are able to offer advice based on their wisdom, judgement and knowledge of the health care system. This makes them no less valuable to the patient, but it does shift the basis of valuation away from pure expertise.

At the same time, the carefully defended borders of occupational privilege are under steady assault. Barristers were unable to stop moves to allow solicitors to speak in court. Paralegals can undertake much of the work once done by lawyers. The medical profession has

run a better defence, but nurse practitioners are now on the loose, and once their blindingly obvious value and cost-effectiveness can no longer be shrouded, further gains into traditional doctor territory are sure to be made. Teaching assistants are able to do what only teachers could once do. Restrictions on necessary qualifications for stockbroking have been loosened.

To secure their position, the professions should not engage in futile attempts to prevent these dynamic processes. They should instead strengthen the other sources of professional status and authority – the ethos guiding their work, and its transforming impact on the world around them. As Tom Brown’s schoolmaster insisted:

You talk of ‘working to get your living’ and ‘doing some real good in the world’ in the same breath. Now you may be getting a good living in a profession, and yet not doing any good at all in the world . . . keep the latter before you as a holy object, and you will be right, whether you make a living or not; but if you dwell on the other, you’ll very likely drop into mere money-making.⁵

Professional identity has been based on good qualifications and good collective organisation. In the future it will need to be based more securely on good work. Good work is work undertaken with integrity as well as competence. A professional is someone who is demonstrably good at what they do, but also doing it against a set of fixed ethical benchmarks that the user can trust. Work, whether paid or unpaid, is the principal means by which we impact on the world. It is a transforming process. Good work consists of efforts to transform the world or the people around us in a positive direction. Good professional work additionally involves the exercise of a set of specific skills. This is where trends in professional identification coincide with a growing demand among individuals for work that is ‘meaningful’.⁶

In their book, *Good Work: When excellence and ethics meet*, Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon write that people who are doing good work – according to their definition, where ‘excellence and ethics meet’ – are those who are ‘thoughtful

about their responsibilities and the *implications* of their work' (our emphasis).⁷

The necessary and positive processes of meritocracy and information-sharing are chipping away at the Mount Olympus model of professionalism. The professions need to re-connect with the deeper roots of their authority: why, how and to what end they do their work. Good work begets professionalism, and the future of the professions is dependent on their ability to remake and refashion good work.

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Notes

- 1 H Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 See www.guardian.co.uk/crime/article/0,,1749623,00.html (accessed 26 May 2006).
- 5 Quoted in M Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- 6 See J Knell and R Reeves, *Transforming Work* (forthcoming).
- 7 H Gardner, M Csikszentmihalyi and W Damon, *Good Work: When excellence and ethics meet* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).