

Jal Mehta: The Paradox of the Professions

The shift to a knowledge-centered economy in the late 1960s led a variety of social observers to conclude that the future would be controlled by experts of various stripes. The demand for expertise, in turn, would increase the levels of schooling and the demand for academic credentials. These predictions have turned out to be exactly half true: knowledge has continued to multiply at an ever-growing rate, and credentialing has expanded apace; however, at the same time there has been increasing skepticism of experts and schooled knowledge across a variety of domains. Resurgent populism, the growth of markets and the state at the expense of the professions, increasing recognition of the importance of experiential or craft knowledge, and the emergence of democratic forms of knowledge have all challenged the importance of codified expert knowledge. In this essay, responding in part to Gardner's essay, I chart the causes and consequences of these trends and counter-trends over the past 40 years.

Expansion of the Professions

The forces driving the continued expansion of the professions seem to be relatively straight-forward and largely consistent with the ideas laid out by Daniel Bell and others more than 40 years ago. Economically, the shift from goods to services, from manufacturing to knowledge work, has continued and is the master economic trend of our age. Professionalization connects to both these economic needs and to the modern cognitive belief in the centrality of rationality and science.

More specifically, professionalization continues to expand because it is in the interest of the professions, the universities and other educational institutions who credential, and the individuals who professionalize. For the occupational group, efforts to assume the characteristics of a "profession"—tie to an established knowledge base, extend training, socially close the field from those who have not been properly trained and licensed—serves to raise the status of the field. Depending on your perspective, this shift either allows the field to provide social value by ensuring standards of practice across its members, or it allows the field to charge rents by creating a monopoly for its services. Similarly, for universities and other educational institutions, sponsoring professions is both a critical source of revenue, and also an opportunity for these institutions to extend their influence into more spheres of social life. Finally, for individuals, professionalization provides a way to increase one's status and earning potential, as well as to gain systematic expertise in one's chosen field. Particularly in the hourglass shaped economy that has emerged since the 1970s, professional credentialing is perhaps the primary method for placing oneself on the right side of the economic divide. Thus for reasons both self-interested and more altruistic, the forces of professionalization continue to grow apace, for reasons that are quite similar to the initial predictions of Bell and his contemporaries.

Challenges to Professional Authority

Perhaps more interesting, because less predictable, are the range of forces and reasons that have been marshaled against professionalization. For fun, I'm going to broadly describe these as Hegelian, Krausian, Sennettian, and Jacksonian.

Hegelian: The internal contradictions of professionalization -- From this perspective, the forces of professionalization contain within themselves the seeds of their own destruction (Hegelian only in the dialectic sense, no further connection Hegel posited). There are at least two forms of this argument. One was outlined by Michael Young in his early satire of meritocracy: namely that the meritocratic ethos of allocating positions by virtue of formal educational advancement will inevitably generate populist resentment among those who do not succeed in meritocratic competition. The blue state/red state

divide and the post 1968 caricaturing of Democratic politicians as intellectual elitists are examples that support this scenario. It is probably not coincidental that the period which has seen both rising inequality and the growth of a knowledge class has also seen an increasingly fierce attack on knowledge elites. On this point, it would be interesting to look at the United States in comparative perspective, as it would be worth investigating whether anti-professional politics have similarly grown in other nations without our strong evangelical communities and business culture.

A second version of this argument is more specific to the professions and particularly the quasi-professions. As more and more things have become potentially credentialed (business, journalism, hair-dressing, etc.), there is potentially increasing skepticism of the value of putatively authoritative knowledge. In other words, while it is fairly easy to accept that doctors, lawyers, and professors have esoteric knowledge not possessed by the general public, whether the same is true of journalists, business school graduates, and real estate agents is harder to definitively establish. It is plausible to speculate that skepticism of these quasi-professionals may reflect back onto the whole notion of professional expertise: If it turns out that I can sell my own house more effectively than a real estate agent, or book my flight more cheaply than a travel agent, or make my own will online without the help of a lawyer, do those experiences over time make me more likely to question the whole notion that there are distinct classes of people whose knowledge to which I need to defer?

A related point is that the growing education of the populace may narrow the chasm between generally educated people and professional experts, which may make people more likely to trust their own judgment rather than the decisions of the professionals. There is some evidence that this has happened with respect to school teaching – in affluent suburbs where many parents are more educated than their children’s teachers, parents are more likely to question the supposed “expertise” of these teachers, trusting their own knowledge of what a good education should look like over what they perceive as the quasi-professional judgment of the teachers.

Krausian: The growth of states and markets and the diminishing space for the professions – Another viewpoint, developed most fully by Elliott Krause in his book, [The Death of the Guilds](#), is that professions have gradually been losing ground to both states and markets. In terms of markets, the rise of neoliberalism creates a context in which market logic becomes the central worldview for thinking about the organization of economic and social life. From this perspective, professions are clearly rent-seeking monopolies, and the mode to social improvement lies not in building the expertise of a particular professional group, but rather in lowering barriers to entry and creating opportunities for new entrants and entrepreneurs (think of alternative licensing in teaching). Empowering consumers can also threaten the authority of professional expertise—consider the impact of direct-to-consumer advertising in medicine. More broadly, the growth of neoliberalism is fueled by rising distrust of large central authorities—most notably the state, but [surveys also reveal](#) declining trust of a range of professional groups. Again, in a world in which the presumed ethos is competitive, notions of social trustee professionalism are viewed as masks for economic self-interest.

Somewhat surprisingly, the period from the mid-1960s to the present has also seen the growth of state authority, particularly with respect to health care and education. The Texas two-step of *increasing* ambitions for what the government is seeking to do (Medicare, Medicaid, original ESEA, NCLB) and *decreasing* confidence in those providing the service, as well as a broader mood of retrenchment, has created a politics of accountability in which state agents are frequently asking professional groups to show improved results and holding them accountable for their failure to do so. The need to control costs, particularly in medicine, has also led to fierce conflicts between doctors and state reimbursement

agencies. Large increases in state and federal money (in the post 60s period compared to previously) has also meant that doctors have shifted away from fee for service and are increasingly part of large bureaucratic organizations that are largely funded by the state. Overall, the result of growth in both markets and the state is what Krause and other observers of the professions have seen as a large decline in professional authority from its apex in the mid 1960s.

Sennettian: The resurgent appeal of craft knowledge as opposed to scientific knowledge: Professions have historically been grounded not only in a knowledge base, but specifically in a theoretical and often scientific knowledge base. As Daniel Bell puts it, “What has become decisive for society is the new centrality of *theoretical* knowledge, the primacy of theory over empiricism, and the codification of knowledge into abstract systems of symbols that can be translated into many different and varied circumstances.” But subsequent years have suggested that there is a central importance to craft knowledge – “knowing how” as well as “knowing what.” In professionally ambiguous fields like education, there is a clear trend to moving away from trying to train practitioners in general, theoretical, scientific knowledge transmitted primarily in universities, and instead increasing the level of on-the-ground specific practical training that is best offered in actual schools. Medicine has retained its status as the profession par excellence in part because its training graduates professionals who are actually prepared to practice; law schools are increasingly being pressed to graduate students who actually know how to practice law, and the influence of case teaching across the professional schools has increased the degree to which they train future practitioners in the actual dilemmas that face current ones. It has become increasingly apparent that scientific knowledge is not enough, and that it must be combined with craft knowledge to be practically effective, which either undermines claims of professional authority, or suggests that they must be cast in broader terms. (This theme connects to Richard Sennett’s work on craft knowledge.)

Jacksonianism meets the 1960s and then the Internet age: Democratic authority challenging professional authority – Perhaps the most famous critic of elites in American history was Andrew Jackson, who famously attacked the corrupt nature of elites and emphasized the wisdom of the common man. In this sense, the debate between populist and more meritocratic views is centuries old. These ideas were revived in the 1960s, as two strands of critique of professional authority came to the fore. One derived from the ideas of the New Left and their distrust of large organizations (both state and market) and their control over American life. The hierarchies of such organizations and their power over American life were both opposed to more participatory notions of democracy. A related second strand came from community control advocates, who argued that professionals were abrogating decisions that belonged to the people, and in particular that a largely white professional class was making decisions about minority clients that were neither controlled by, nor good for, the community. Legacies of these ideas remain with us today; the pre-1960s notion of neutral and trusted authorities are gone forever, professionals in subsequent years have had to find ways to adapt to the notions that client and community decision-making are legitimate (if not always welcomed) parts of any professional field.

Meanwhile, in more recent years, the rise of the Internet has greatly empowered the broader populace against those possessing expert knowledge. Two features in particular stand out: one, that knowledge is now so readily available that the previously esoteric knowledge of professionals is now much more frequently accessible to lay people. As previewed briefly above, whole industries like travel agents have been eliminated as the public has gained access to previously protected knowledge. Defenders of expertise might argue that access to knowledge makes people think that they know more than they do; professionals not only know information, they have categories for organizing that information and drawing usable inferences, which may not be as readily available to amateurs in those domains. But,

even so, it is clear that the Internet has greatly shifted the knowledge balance between the professionals and the public.

The second consequence of the Internet is in the democratization of the production of knowledge; not only is the *consumption* of knowledge more evenly distributed, so is the *creation* of knowledge. We can see this most clearly in the skirmishes between “professional” and “amateur” journalists, where the former group argues that it should maintain its standing as the primary source of information because of its methods of producing and vetting information; whereas the latter group argues that opening the ranks of who can produce knowledge will yield a much more diverse and complete picture of the social world. How all of this will play out remains to be seen, but it is clear that we are in the midst of a new age when it comes to who can decide what is authoritative knowledge.

So What? And Implications for Sociological Theorizing

Why does any of this matter? In 1973, Bell predicted that scientific knowledge and the professions that monopolized it would be the dominant force in shaping economic life, with substantial implications also for patterns of social stratification and political power. The above observations suggest a more contested picture, one in which the logic of professionalism has both gained and lost ground, and that other major institutions have also competed for primacy. Understanding the contours and outcomes of these struggles between at one level, professions, markets and the state, and, at another, between particular professions and their lay challengers is critical for understanding how knowledge, power and authority is distributed in modern society. It also suggests the need for a new round of substantive theorizing which can parsimoniously take account of this more pluralistic landscape.

More theoretically, the developments charted here could be highly fertile ground for sociologists, particularly if they were willing to put a bit more of “institutions” into “institutional logics.” Institutional logics emphasize the ways in which we live in a pluralistic universe with competing principles or logics of authority that often compete, combine, or conflict in interesting and often unpredictable ways. The scissors movement of expanding professional logics but also expanded notion of democratic authority can be seen in these terms. But what is needed to fully understand these cross-cutting developments, is a more institutional notion of “logics” – that explores concretely where their power lies, how that power is mobilized, in what venue, and under which rules of the game. In other words, this is a view that sits within a deep cultural ontology, but one in which culture and power are not opposed, but rather culture is part of power, a kind of resource that one can mobilize to achieve authority in situations of uncertainty.