

PROFESSIONALISM AS METAPHOR

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THE STATUS OF PROFESSIONALISM

. Role specialization in the division of labor has included professionals for many centuries, for both primitive and advanced cultures (Durkheim 1964; Moore 1970; Malinowski 1954). Universities and guilds during the Middle Ages, and the 19th Century Industrial Age created professionalism as a vocational ideal (Larson 1977; Reader 1955; Weber 1961). Much of the literature on professionalism is concerned with the various vocations that occasionally are found "passing" as professional. Other literature on the professions examines the abnormalities of such vocations as medicine and law, which, with theology, have historically served as models for all later professions (Etzioni 1969; Vollmer & Mills 1966; Wilensky 1964). Very little is written about the concept of professionalism as such.

. We define professionalism as an attitude of workmanship, a desire to respond skillfully, honestly, conscientiously, and equitably, to the legitimate requirements for professional service. This attitude is not just the heart of all vocations, but is also the foundation on which all aspects of viable societies must be built. Professionalism universally represents a moral ethic, and a code of service which must be followed if normative human relations are to be maintained. We will look at the contemporary quality of professionalism by using metaphoric analogies. Our purpose is to incite controversial thought, and to focus attention on the professional aspect of our vocational and social existence, as a matter of sociological interest. This effort is not meant to be definitive, because that could stifle the flow of dialogue and discussion which we hope to encourage.

SEVEN METAPHORS: SEEING THE WRONG TO SEE THE RIGHT

1) Professionalism as a saint vocation. We have conferred sainthood on the vocational quality of professionalism. Garbing it in the ideology and ritual of perfection, we have rendered it unaccountable. Its rites and secret codes are awesome, and it must never be disparaged or doubted by "lay" persons.

2) Professionalism as a Trojan Horse. Industrial societies have generated a massive professionalism in their midst, releasing forces that may be inimical to basic social interests. Through public relations agencies, representatives of the professions have spread the message, that if you are not a professional, you are nobody, but if you are a professional, then you are anybody you say you are. Once professional status is granted, it is permanent, and it is protected from the prying eyes of any but fellow professionals, who can be counted on never to foul the common nest.

3) Professionalism as a Free Lunch. All that glitters is not gold, and there is no free lunch. We should realize that though the professional model of service is supposed to be available to us all, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, such equality of opportunity does not exist. To test this proposition, be black, old, or impoverished, and in urgent need of medical attention in the emergency room at your local hospital. Or be any kind of social pariah, however the current level of cultural intolerance defines it; and have to rely on your interests being justly served with any part of the legal system. The dispensing of professional goods and services is probably associated with as much prejudice and favoritism as the production and exchange of other goods and services.

4) Professionalism as Southern Hospitality. The cordial hospitality of the professional is no more.

The Florence Nightingale responsiveness of an earlier professionalism has been replaced by a noncommittal "Who are you?" look, and a fixed smile. Many of the right motions and sounds are present with professionalism, but the substance is lacking.

5) Professionalism as a Utopian Panacea Following Boguslaw (1966) we suggest that the contemporary form of professionalism is offered as the highest order of utopianism, to which industrialized societies currently look for the "final solution". Today's brand of professionalism is like Boguslaw's closed cybernetic systems of communication, called "technosystematic "new utopias", to distinguish them from the more responsive utopian structures of the past. Modern professionalism has the goal of being all things to all people, which produces unrealistic hopes and promises.

6) Professionalism as the Brave New World "Community, Identity, Stability." This is the World State's motto in Huxley's Brave New World (1932). Fertilizing, bottling, and conditioning rooms, cloning, soma, and feelies: all were designed to fulfill this After Ford product. Something of this is voiced by today's professionalism. To assure it, we go through the ideologically antiseptic fertilizing, bottling, and conditioning chambers called universities, where we artificially reproduce the "professional look". Professionalism gives us community, identity, and stability, but at what price?

7) Professionalism as Mom the Guru Professionalism has become a societal mother, who becomes our refuge for every personal, technical, and social problem. The professional becomes the ideal guide for such everyday decisions as how to raise children, how to talk with one's mate, and how to deal with the plumber and the credit manager.

RECOMMENDATIONS

. In these metaphors, there is a common theme: that contemporary professionalism is a myth, and possibly a dangerous one. At a distance, the structure looks substantial. On close approach, its outlines blur and shrink. Beginning with Ralph Nader's exposure of the auto industry, and moving to Vietnam by way of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, and Watergate, to the present, with repeated revelations of illegal and immoral conduct by such exemplary agents as high government officers, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Central Intelligence Agency, and the medical profession, we have been massively exposed to unprofessional and downright criminal behavior among the ranks of professionals. Professional businessmen conspire to restrict production and fix prices of shoddy and often dangerous products. Their advertizing is meant to confuse rather than to educate. Professional soldiers manipulate "body counts" and sign documents which, for purely political purposes, falsely testify on the use of military hardware. Professional politicians illegally solicit and spend campaign funds, and scheme to thwart investigations of their illegal actions. Professional lawyers collude to strike the best financial and political advantages for themselves, ignoring their clients' interests and the truth, in their single-minded rush to courtroom victory. Professional doctors mulct health agencies for services not given, and give treatments, including surgery which are unrelated to the patient's symptoms and disabilities, just for the money. Professional law enforcement officers rely on expediency to accomplish their role, and may collaborate with the very criminal forces they are obliged to control. Such betrayal of public trust by these and other so-called professionals seriously weakens the foundation of professionalism.

. Our faith in professionals would not be undermined by unprofessional conduct, if only a few abused their vocational and ideological callings, but we are faced with widespread cynicism, malfeasance and despair. Our faith in professionalism and related high-order principles will be shattered by what threatens to be their moral collapse. The spirit of professionalism implies great moral and ethical integrity, and the promise that one's word and one's best efforts can be relied on. Ruptures in the social contract with professionalism will likely mirror and predict breaks at other points in the social fabric. If doctors, lawyers, policemen, and military leaders are no longer believed, can the disbelief, distrust, and abuse of other social precepts be far behind? If in the daily conduct of human affairs, our moral reach no longer fits our grasp, what kind of a world will we have? Will it be filled with shysters, hucksters, rip-offs, and con artists? Will it be a predatory world, red in tooth and claw? A world powered by "lifeboat" ethics? Perhaps. The writing may already be on the wall, if we could but read.

. Clearly, modern societies urgently need honest and competent professionalism. We need professional services characterized by idealism, dedication, honesty, fairness, and selflessness. Both as dispenser and as recipient, we need these experiences in our lives to revitalize our flagging spirit. Perhaps what we need is found not in the organization of professionalism, but in the attitude of professionalism. But professionalism in our culture has become a deified juggernaut, an institutionalized opiate, which peddles false visions of safety and accomplishment. Its immense potential for positive fulfillment is little realized.

. According to Barzun (1978, 68) ". . . the message for (professionalism) today is that (its) one hope

of survival .. is the recovery of mental and moral force .. When (professionalism's) problem is a failure of competence and morality, nothing will solve it but work of an individual mind and conscience .. Without some kind of heroic effort, we professionals shall all go down .. appropriately .. as non-heroes, together." And that is no metaphor!

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