Professions in Modern Society

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Is there any future for the professions in modern society? A premise of the following essay is that you cannot be sure how to answer this question. Professions are a mechanism of transition from the society of estates of early modern Europe to the functionally differentiated society of modernity.[1] This transitional character may be the most important point in the history and sociology of the professions. Therefore, there are two main tasks for the following contribution: First of all the argument will outline professions as a transitional mechanism, and then some aspects of the stability or discontinuity of the form 'profession' in modern society will be discussed.

Since late medieval ages European society makes use of corporations as mechanism for introducing innovations into a societal system, which at the same time tries to block structural consequences of these innovations.[2] In contra-distinction to estates, which institutionalize differences of rank among families, corporations were specialized organizations. Religious orders and fraternities, cities, universities and *professions* were candidates for being a corporation. All these types of systems were defined by being specialized on a functional domain and not by occupying a position in a hierarchy of societal ranks. Furthermore, corporations were not composed of families and households but of individual (mainly male) persons. It was not possible to establish a corporation by the free consent of the persons involved. A corporation had to be explicitly authorized by a spiritual or temporal power, and this authorization made use of the legal form of privilege.

Occupational groups were one possible type of corporation, especially the learned professions of law, medicine and theology, but also, even occupational groups in the crafts and trades. What is the difference between professions and the other occupational groups mentioned here? First of all the close interrelation of professions and universities. In early modern Europe (16th–18th century) this interrelation of professions and universities was often institutionalized in faculties, faculties being colleges of doctors (*collegia doctorum*), which included many persons who never or rarely taught in the university but who were local practicians of the respective professions of law, medicine and theology and who, as such, obtained the right of membership in the academic corporation.[3] Many of these faculties, which functioned as academic *and* professional corporations at the same time, controlled the right of admission to professional practice and thereby established a professional monopoly for the respective region.[4] This coupling of university and profession then directly results in the close interrelation of the respective profession and one of the great knowledge systems of European universities: jurisprudence, physics (i.e. knowledge on bodies) and theology. It is this interrelation of profession and learned knowledge that separates the professional corporations from those of the trades and crafts. At the same time, this coupling to learned knowledge gives the professions their most contested attribute: they were often said to be *disinterested* and this was supposed to mean that functional interests, which are due to the socialization into a professional corpus of knowledge, are able to dominate those personal (and financial) interests prevalent in other occupational fields. Two other important

0390-6701/97/010095-08

attributes are the close coupling of the professions to the state and the elite status of those professionals trained at universities. In some respects they can therefore claim equality in societal status to the nobility and the patriciate of the cities.

In the 18th century, there appeared the novel idea that professional groups (judges, physicians and now even school teachers educated at the philosophical faculties) were professional estates (*'Berufsstände'*).[5] In this term, which may be thought to be a combination of opposites, the corporative aspect is already less important. It is now easier to see that estates defined by birth and functionally defined systems are competing options. The classification of estates is diversified, but first of all it loses its hierarchical character because it is no longer plausible that a plurality of professional estates should be inscribed into a hierarchy of ranks.

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In modern society functional differentiation becomes the decisive principle. By pushing back estates and professional estates, there arises a new order of societal macro systems, each of which is identified by a functional primacy. These are systems for law, science, politics and the economy, mass communication, intimate relations and other functional points of view. What then becomes of the professions of early modern Europe?

It is easy to see, that if you really presuppose functional differentiation as the differentiation principle for modern society, there is no such thing as a professional complex (Parsons, 1968)[6] or a system of professions (Abbott, 1988)[7] in a functionally differentiated society. There is no bridging principle called professionalism that neutralizes the differences between the function systems.[8] Function systems have to be thought to be closed on the basis of their constitutive operations, and that means that professional action in function systems can no longer be thought of as embedded into an environment of other professional action systems. This renders the ecological thinking of symbolic interactionism problematical (and of the Chicago school), and this functions as the basis of the writings of Andrew Abbott, the most influential theorist of the professions in the last decade.[9] Regarding the case of Andrew Abbott it has to be remarked that his successful book of 1988, that was focussed on a 'system of professions', which included a great number of professionalized occupations that competed in an ecological context for 'jurisdictions' (and for the precise demarcations of these 'jurisdictions'), does not sufficiently take into account his own earlier views. In an essay of 1981, Abbott described a principle for rationalizing professional action, which he called 'professional purity'. This meant to say, that in each profession there is observed a regression to only a core of professional action problems, which implies a negation of all diffuse interconnections with other professional action spheres.[10] *Real* problems, however, are always diffuse problems and therefore, it may be supposed, that there will be in modern society ever more problems that cannot be reconstructed and solved in their complexity by the progressively more specialized perspectives of the professions. Furthermore, it may be registered that this early diagnosis by Abbott was rather near to a description of modern society, which sees this as a functionally differentiated macro system.

Our starting question has to be asked again: How are professions possible in a society described to be a functionally differentiated system? There are occupations in all function systems; but normally they exist as a plurality and heterogeneity of occupational groups that are specific to the function system in question. Therefore

the unity of a function system normally will not be supposed to be the unity of one central profession germane to the function system. If you look to emergent function systems of 20th century society, e.g. tourism, mass communication and sports, there is no possible argument that would allow them to be described as professionalized function systems. Professionalization here means the existence of *one* occupational group defining the system in its identity and combining classical attributes of professions, such as: orientation to clients, possession of an intricate knowledge system, service ideals, claims to professional monopolies, etc. Nevertheless there are still some exceptions: function systems for which it may be said that their description seems to coincide with the description of one central professional group. Law, medicine, education—and as far as speaking of education in schools or in families—religion and finally the military, are obvious candidates. But which are the special features of these function systems?

A first peculiarity is to be seen when one asks oneself how the different function systems conceive their respective public. One of the most important implications of the theory of functional differentiation is that differentiation is accompanied by the process of inclusion. The concept of inclusion means that all those members of society who are not involved in the operations of a function system via performance roles are nonetheless important as a public of this function system.[11] That is there are specific roles for members of the respective public: roles for voters, consumers, sports spectators and religious lay persons. In the professionalized function systems it is now conspicuous that the public is thought of as consisting of individualized clients, and who as clients, are involved with personal problems they cannot solve themselves. These problems are worked at by the professionalized performance roles of the system. It would be unthinkable to describe the consumer in the economy, or the voter in the political system, as a client in this sense (besides in the deviant variant that institutionalizes functional differentiation in terms of patron–client-relations).[12] Such a theoretical reconstruction of professions, which is focussed on clients and on people-processing is, by the way, another central aspect of the Chicago tradition.[13] But it is remarkable that this aspect comes less to the fore in ecological thinking, which emphasizes the competitive relations among professions and is therefore disposed to give less prominence to the system–environment-relations of the particular profession, as these have first of all the form of institutionalizing professional–client-relationships.

In the professionalized function systems, the interrelation of performance roles and their complementary roles is therefore institutionalized as professional–client-relations. Furthermore, it is important that there is, even in the professionalized function systems, a plurality of occupations (a plurality of heterogeneous performance roles) but that in these systems a hierarchy of professional work evolved, which means that in each system the respective core profession controls the work of the other occupational groups.[14] This dominant position of a one-core profession in a function system is now related to another particularity of the professionalized function systems. The control or dominance position claimed by the core profession is related to this core profession and takes care of a corpus of knowledge, which is an essential component of the European tradition of science and which furthermore, as an action oriented knowledge system on scientific foundations (i.e. as dogmatics), is fundamental for professional action in the respective function system. There are considerable historical and regional variations referring to the degree and the seriousness with which scientific status could be claimed for these corpora of knowledge (one may only point to the German conception—unusual in

international comparison—that legal knowledge can be thought of as legal science).[15] But these variations do not change one decisive fact: there is a radical difference that separates law and theology and even the teaching profession in its philosophical and scientific foundation, from a profession such as social work (which is based on institutionalized altruism and on helping other people without any scientific knowledge claim considered as an intellectual foundation).[16]

A third particularity of the professionalized function systems results again from the specific constellation of performance roles and complementary roles. The emergence of complementary roles takes in the professionalized function systems in the way that persons (and organizations) are individualized in their contact to the performance roles. The problem contexts in which professional action arises always seem to be such that the problems refer to an individualized person (or organization) as being concerned and dependent on professional actors, in respects that are relevant for the very existence and stability of these persons or organizations. That is, these problems are not at all of a routine character.[17] This goes along with a certain interactive closeness and intimacy of contacts, which implies that in the respective function systems the interaction level[18] is of especial prominence (a preference for interaction systems as the form of professional intervention is institutionalized). That does not exclude the possibility that the most extensive part of professional work is done without clients being present. But the results of professional work are normally transferred to an interaction system in which these results are applied and a minimum form of active collaboration is expected from the client.

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The catalogue of specifics of professionalized function systems that has been just sketched[19] makes visible how many historical pre-conditions there are for the emergence of this specific type of function system. Therefore doubts are justified if the genesis of such professional patterns happens again in modern society. In German systems theory, there has been discussion over the past 2 years, which examines if social work is such a candidate for a new function system arising in the 20th century. This hypothesis implies that social work as a profession is involved with problems that autocatalytically generate a new function system 'social help'.[20] This would be a second-order function system, which in its genesis, already reacts on the consequences of functional differentiation as the structural form of modern society. In contrast to this I find the more plausible interpretation emphasizes, in the case of social work, its persistent subordination to other functional imperatives (law, medicine, politics). Therefore social work seems to operate orthogonally to functional differentiation. It is plausible to relate social work to inclusion–exclusion, as the other structure in modern society, operates orthogonally to functional differentiation.[21] That is, social work seems to have as its problem focus, ongoing or imminent events of exclusion from one or several function systems. It has its logic in preventing such exclusion events or in assisting persons affected by one or several exclusions. Therefore, a functional problem perspective of its own, for social work, seems not very probable.[22]

Besides this special case of social work there are many hints that the classical pre-conditions of controlling a whole function system by a one-core profession in a dominant or monopolistic position, no longer hold. A very important question regards trust. In the dominant version of the theory of professions, of which Talcott

Parsons was the best known representative, it was always obvious that professional action means an exchange between profession and client, and to which the client contributes a rather considerable amount of trust (as a generalized medium of exchange).[23] Such an investment of trust seemed plausible because of the existential uncertainty of the client. It was at the same time an essential pre-condition for the cooperation of the client, which was often thought to be indispensable.[24] Trust creates, furthermore, an action space for the professional that allows him or her to take risks, and it was sometimes interpreted as a kind of remuneration for the professional whose motivation was not strictly thought as an economic one. Today the social-structural prerequisites for this extraordinary constellation seem to be no longer existent, although this does not mean that uncertainty in professional action has been reduced.

Today, there exists a much more extensive diffusion of knowledge in society. This includes knowledge about illness and health, about possibilities of educational intervention, and strategies in law disputes, etc. But first of all in modern society, knowledge is represented by being distributed by mass media. For knowledge distributed by mass media there is the premise that it is known by everybody.[25] Coincident with this, the willingness to criticize (societal institutions) increases, and this happens for the very reason that criticism is the form in which mass media processes knowledge. Knowledge on social structures becomes knowledge on scandals and abuses. There are some empirical hints that this creates a situation in which trust is still invested in mass media itself, but trust in all other societal institutions is progressively weakened because their defects are publicized by the mass media every day.[26] The consequences of this for the professions may be considerable.

I will illustrate this transformation by an example from American medicine. A central topic in the heroic self-description of American medical doctors was the 3-year transition period between academic studies and the status of a completely educated physician, which is called residency training. The working week of the resident could comprise 120 working hours, and included one or two shifts that could last 36 hours without any break. It is remarkable that even a few years ago this institution could still be affirmatively described as symbolizing the extraordinary demands that were considered to be normal for a profession such as medicine. At the same time this was thought to establish the trust of the public in the unconditional engagement of the medical doctor in the well-being of his clients.[27] In the last few years these forms of residency training have collapsed, and this has been because of the pressure of cases dealt with by the mass media and legal courts. These were cases of medical malpractice supposedly caused by the lack of experience and the overfatigue of resident physicians (Rothman, 1996). Therewith we enter a world in which an attentive observation of competence differences and a certain amount of distrust in relation to the attending physician become normal phenomena, and professionals react on this by buying malpractice insurance instead of insisting on an unsuccessful demand for the client's trust.

Another component of the same situation is the establishing of evaluation and auditing.[28] The professionalized function systems and their formal organizations are progressively joined by specialists for economic, juridical and organizational questions. Their function is to re-analyse the ways of observation that are established in the professions by a second-order observation via incongruent perspectives. That means that professional dominance and the self-control of the professions is substituted by a situation in which there always exists one more observer who

evaluates the distinctions that are made, and the success in using them, by the application of a heterogeneous set of distinctions. This is a situation of which only the beginnings are seen today. But these beginnings make it more and more probable that the mono-professional function system, that in its internal proceedings and in its external contacts was represented by one profession only (this profession being a self-controlling entity furthermore), is a thing of the past.

Notes

1. cf. As a background earlier writings of the present author (Stichweh, 1992a; 1994, Ch. 12–15; 1996).
2. cf. Stichweh (1991, 35ff).
3. See some interesting studies in Romano and Verger (1994) and Romano (1995).
4. cf. As a study in which this is precisely to be seen, see (Marchand, 1900).
5. cf. On the teaching estate ('*Lehrstand*') (Lange, 1706, pp. 93–94).
6. Parsons (1968).
7. Abbott (1988).
8. But see White (1992, pp. 222–225), who, by implication, argues against function systems and postulates such a bridging principle professionalism, which he calls a style.
9. cf. Some critical remarks on Abbott in Dingwall and King (1995), and see Gaziano (1996), on the genesis of the ecological approach.
10. Abbott (1981); cf. on purity, White (1992, *passim*).
11. cf. On the complementarity of performance roles and their corresponding public (Nadel, 1957); on inclusion see Luhmann (1977, pp. 234–242); Luhmann (1981, Ch. IV); Stichweh (1988).
12. cf. Luhmann (1995), and more general Eisenstadt and Roniger (1980).
13. The main actor here is Everett Hughes (see his collected papers in Hughes, 1971) whose thinking should therefore be distinguished from the tradition beginning with Park and Burgess.
14. cf. Some interesting remarks in Parsons (1959).
15. cf. On this Stichweh (1992b).
16. cf. Interesting on this idea, see Abbott (1995, especially p. 561).
17. cf. An example of this point with psychiatry, Goldstein (1985, p. 524): 'psychiatry is...a science of interpretation, transmuting the categories under which phenomena are subsumed. By effecting this category shift – or, in medical parlance, by making a diagnosis – it can rescue types of individuals from radical "otherness" and argue for their membership in the human community' cf. Naegele, 1956.
18. The terms interaction level and interaction system are to be understood in the sense introduced by Luhmann (1972), and Goffman (1983).
19. See for a more comprehensive argument Stichweh (1996).
20. See Baecker (1994); Fuchs *et al.* (1994); Fuchs and Schneider (1994).
21. See, on inclusion–exclusion, Luhmann (1996b); Stichweh (1997).
22. See Bommes and Scherr (1996); cf. Abbott (1995).
23. cf. The last essays in Parsons (1978).
24. An extreme case in this respect is psychoanalysis.
25. On this situation, see Luhmann (1996a).
26. See the remarkable development in the United States from 1966 to 1980, which Coleman (1990, pp. 94–95), documents with figures from opinion research: the trust in television news rises, for the printed newspapers it is constant, all the other institutions (labour, medicine, organized religion, government, congress, major companies) suffer from a decrease of trust (cf. p. 194).
27. See this traditional emphatical mode in Thomas (1983).
28. An interesting analysis of auditing in Power (1997).

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