

NOTAS Y DISCUSIONES

SHAPING THE PROFESSION – AND RESHAPING SOCIO-POLITICAL INCLUSION

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The figure of the “professional” looms large in contemporary neoliberal societies as an ideal for economic activity and socio-political inclusion, and even as a model for individual self-development, in spheres of existence extending far beyond the limited circle of the specific types of (traditional and liberal) occupations. But how and when did this figure arise? What has led professional activity to become such an essential part of our personal, social, moral, economic, and political life?

In an attempt to address these –more than vaguely Weberian– questions, I propose to look at professionalism as an *experience*, that is –to recast the definition of the latter notion and overlapping given by Michel Foucault in his genealogical studies on sexuality– as the correlation “of fields of knowledge, types of normativity and forms of subjectivity” (Foucault, 1984/1985, p. 4). The research presented in this book tries indeed –*si parva licet componere magnis*– to remake Foucault’s philosophical move by shifting its focus and investigating the conditions under which professional activity has become the object of a wide problematisation, which involves different fields of knowledge (as law, philosophy, sociology and theology), specific norms (legal and ethical), and a distinct way of conceiving one’s own identity, duties, and abilities (the skilled professional, acting with professionalism). In so doing, the book aims at contributing to a genealogy of professionalism, that is, to a historical investigation of the stratified valorisation –at a moral, legal, social, economic, and epistemological level– which has shaped the “professional” as a form of existence and an object of study.

The “professional” has indeed become the linchpin of different discourses and studies, and has even undermined the figure of the “worker” which was key to the political and sociological debates of the twentieth century. Professional values and duties are themselves minutely scrutinised, as attested by the current discourse of professional ethics. On the one hand, this discourse is developed within a recently consolidated field of academic research geared toward shaping professional conduct and moralising behaviours; on the other, with a steadily growing number of codes of conduct and norms produced by professional bodies, it is also a legal source of normativity and soft law. Max Weber and, more recently, distinguished scholars as Luc Boltanski, Ève Chiappello, and Andrew Abbott have famously investigated these aspects. However, a comprehensive historical inquiry into the discourse of professional ethics as such (in different professional areas), and the historical conditions of possibility of both this discourse and the very figure of the “professional,” is still lacking. And starting to fill this gap is precisely the immediate goal that this book hopes to achieve.

Italy, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom provide most of the corpus of philosophical, juridical, and theological sources discussed throughout a long journey from Ancient Rome to the present. In taking a *longue durée* approach, the proposed account cannot but offer a sketchy review of some examples and historical passages. A partial map that enables intelligibility is the only possible outcome, established by pointing to a few incidents of conceptual crystallisations, the reciprocal reinforcement of ideas, the close intertwining of juridical, religious, and economic notions, and the dialectics between theorisation and practice.

In sketching this map, Max Weber is an unavoidable reference and inspiration. In his interpretation of the Protestant elaboration of the *Beruf*, the sociologist sums up the idea that a central role was played in the genesis of modern economic rationality, not by the Enlightenment and secularisation, but by the internal process of rationalisation that took place within religions, Protestantism and Calvinism in particular. This perhaps “unproven, yet unrefuted,” thesis (Whatmore, 1998) remains an extraordinary model of historical and philosophical understanding. *Beruf* is, unquestionably, a concept of enormous analytical power, as the profound impact it has had on all our historical readings of professionalism, on the philosophy of work, and even on the actual history of capitalism testifies.

Its analytical power notwithstanding, it is a concept which does not comprehend the entire history of the semantic field of professionalism – although it is fully a part of such a field. In particular, I believe it is reductive to claim that “profession” and *Beruf* are equivalent. Surely, because *Beruf* encompasses a semantic, and practical, richness that

makes it untranslatable —always caught between “profession” and “vocation” as it is— but also because the “profession,” in its historical development, exceeds the *Beruf*. It is precisely this exceedance that allows us a valuable insight into the political implications of an investigation into professionalism —and, for what it is worth, of this book.

Long before it came to indicate, in contemporary society, the type of occupation analysed by the sociology of the professions, or before it found itself being equated with the Protestant and Weberian *Beruf*, the “profession” was something very different. Entwining semasiology and onomasiology, the research outlines a more nuanced history of the concept of “profession” and “professional duty” in their relationship to the notions of “status (*status*)” and “office (*officium*)”, showing that “profession” first emerged as a concept in the semantic field of citizenship and inclusion. Only much later did it enter the semantic field of economic-acquisitive activity and occupation, and, as a result of a slow and multifaceted process, a close link between socio-political position, the carrying out of an economic/professional activity, and the fulfilment of a moral and legal duty is established. The proposed analysis may thus complete Weber’s reading of modern rationalisation by drawing new maps for the historical atlas of modernity and its “iron cage.” Within these maps, a specific model for the profession —deeply rooted in the classical and Christian tradition de *officiis*— can be clearly discerned, and the political implications of professionalism better grasped. These implications are indeed very complex: far from being reduced to questions related to the social and political rise of professional groups, or to their monopoly of expertise, they touch on the social and political apparatus of inclusion.

The profession (*professio*), in fact, originated in the Roman Republic as a conceptual —and indeed practical— tool in the semantic field of citizenship. Echoing the Roman legal institution of the census, it had an inclusive (and precise legal) value, and directly influenced the conceptualisation of the religious profession. At first, being “placed on the register” of a community led to participation in military and spiritual wars, as well as in the destiny of the whole community. In this sense, it signified inclusion and, conversely, exclusion. Over the centuries, the concept of profession has evolved to a point where it indicates something about a person’s occupation (understood as an economic-acquisitive activity), hence operating in the semantic fields of both occupation and citizenship. Through this evolution, a significant connection between those fields has been established. They are both, of course, intertwined and overlapping with the contemporary notion and practice of socially organised work. In other words, our notion of work seems to encompass two different —and historically separated— dimensions: on the one hand, an “economic-acquisitive dimension,” related to an activity carried out

in order to ensure one's means of subsistence, but which has not traditionally been the main basis for a person's socio-political inclusion or citizenship; and, on the other hand, an "inclusive dimension" which, until the end of the middle ages, had little to do with the economic-acquisitive sphere.

As remote as it might seem, this fact proves meaningful in identifying a cornerstone of European social and political rationality, that is, the crucial nexus between occupation and socio-political inclusion, which eventually led to work-democracies and their social conceptualisation of citizenship. The fact that a person's occupation is nowadays key to their standing as a citizen —and that a Republic can even be "grounded on work," as in the Italian case— is testament to the semantic implications of the notion of "profession". A genealogy of the experience of professionalism is not, then, a simple exposition of the evolution of the discourse of professional ethics, nor is it limited to an exploration of the ethical valorisation of work and the genesis of the "iron cage" of capitalism. On the contrary, it is hoped that such a genealogy can contribute to the intelligibility —and, thus, modifiability— of contemporary socio-political thought and the apparatus of citizenship and attribution of political and social rights that lies at its heart.

Not only is this dutiful apparatus (also) Eurocentric, gendered-biased, productivist and environmentally unsustainable. It is also challenged by the current radical transformation of the world of work and professional experience. Information technology has revolutionised the organisation of work and the skills and qualities required of workers, regardless of sectoral or geographical borders, threatening many positions, and affecting the work-life balance and standards of professional conduct in the others. Even more, the dramatic increase in the precariousness of employment —across fields and skill levels— is undermining the Fordist myth of full employment and work-related welfare measures.

Reshaping our work-democracies is therefore crucial: their social protections, their apparatus of citizenship, and their valorisation of professional duties bear the hallmarks of a long history, and of a world of work which belongs to the past. Decent working conditions must undoubtedly be claimed and fought for sternly. But this move alone will hardly be sufficient. Other forms of welfare, protections of rights, valorisation of personal capabilities and activities need to be imagined with the same resolve. The political and philosophical task before us is to recast the vocabulary of socio-political inclusion that we have become accustomed to over the last few hundred years. And a thorough understanding of the historicity of this vocabulary is but a necessary step in this direction.

References

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