

Essay: by John L. McKnight

## THE PROFESSIONAL PROBLEM

Revolutions begin when people who are defined as problems achieve the power to redefine the problem.

A critical point in the development of the civil rights struggle was the Black movement's capacity to declare the central issue the "White problem." A people, declared deficient and in need, unshackled their labels and attempted to lock them on their oppressors.

There was a revolutionary insight in that strategy. It recognized that the power to label people as deficient and declare them in need is the basic tool for control and oppression in modern industrialized societies of democratic and totalitarian persuasions. The agents with comprehensive labelling power in these societies are the helping professionals. Their badge bestows the caring authority to declare their fellow citizens "clients" — a class of deficient people in need.

As was the case in the Black revolution, we can now see signs of "client populations" beginning to wonder whether they are really the problem. One manifestation of this client uneasiness is the "self-help movement." This movement is peopled with many ex-clients who have understood the limits of their professional helpers and/or the disabling effects of their services. The angriest and most political are repeating the Black redefinition of the 1960's. They reject their clienthood and seek liberation by defining the problem as those who have defined them as the problem. To these ex-clients, the central issue is the "professional problem."

Their once lonely struggle to proclaim the "professional problem" has been aided by a growing chorus of voices. Radical social critics such as Ivan Illich have defined the iatrogenic capacities of professionals. Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus have described the decay of primary social structures facilitated by modern professionalism. Eli Ginzberg worries

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that the new class of professionals may usurp the decision making power within our industrial structure. Jacques Barzun concludes that if our professions are to survive with their traditional freedom, a major recovery of mental and moral force will be necessary. Even Nathan Glazer is attracted by the attack on the professionals and hesitantly commends its best spokesmen for their insight. And President Jimmy Carter specifically attacks the lawyers and the doctors of America, sensing that the "professional problem" may now be a popular political issue.

The growing critique suggests that critical issues of power and control must be at stake. Paradoxically, the two most obvious interests involved in the attack on professionals are those who oppose the growth of government and those who would increase the role of government.

The anti-government interests depend upon an automatic popular translation of "professional" into "government bureaucrat." While significant numbers of professionals are state employees or funded by the state, there are obvious distinctions between a professional and a bureaucratic class. Nonetheless, the conservative use of the "professional problem" are clearly focused on attacking big, bureaucratic government. The fact that this translation is so dependable suggests that both classes may have a common characteristic in the popular mind — the production of paid non-work.

The pro-government interests use the "professional problem" to defend the state and its bureaucracy by making the distinction between the professional and bureaucratic classes.

Major corporations have also joined in professional-baiting. The Benefits Director of General Motors complains that the company's cost of medical insurance is greater than the price of all the steel it uses to build automobiles. Corporate managers universally complain of their increasing dependence on growing cadres of lawyers. Indeed, their public rhetoric suggests that corporate leaders no longer view unions as their principal burden. Instead, they are beginning to define the "professional problem/bureaucracy" as the monkey on their back.

The current analysts suggest three basic causes for the revolt against the professional "problem definers."

The first cause is the inefficiency argument. This position suggests that the professionals are being attacked because they are doing less with more. Teachers receive much more of the GNP while student achievement scores decline. The medical professions consume one-ninth of the GNP while life expectancy does not increase. The number of lawyers doubles as the popular sense of injustice multiplies.

Criminal justice systems expand as the perception of personal security declines.

The second cause of the revolt is explained by the arrogance argument. This position suggests that the nature of profession is inherently elitist and dominant. Given the professional powers to define problems, treat them and evaluate the efficacy of the treatment, the client as a person has been a residual category in the process.

The third explanation for the "professional problem" is the iatrogenic argument. While the inefficiency argument suggest that the problem is that professionals don't work, the iatrogenicists argue that they do work — but to our detriment. This position holds that the negative side effects of technological, specialized professionalism are so harmful to so many that the revolt is the reaction to professionally administered injury.

All three explanations for the "professional problem" imply the possibility of reform by recreating an economic, democratic, and efficacious practice. Here and there, one sees serious, if fragile, efforts to reform professional practice. Its labels are eclectic: humanistic medicine, free schools, community dispute settlement, (w)holistic health care, community based care. Whatever the label, the common perception of the reformers is that a heroic effort can rectify professionalism and create a new class of professionals in the useful service of humanity.

It is my view that this vision is neither possible nor desirable. The hopeful future for helping work is more likely to result from the fall of the professions and the development of new definitions of good work.

The politics for a new definition of legitimate work in America may grow from the confluence of citizens angered by the professional invasion of personhood and young professionals disillusioned by lives wasted in the manufacture of need.

The possibility for this politics requires an economy that can provide legitimate work for all those people who do not want to make a living by creating deficiencies in their neighbors.

What is legitimate work? What is worth doing? What is good work for America's people?

The answer to these questions takes us beyond the idea of profession. Our possibilities are incredible if we can envision a society with good work to be done that does not waste our people in the proliferation of profession.

Can you tell me what good work needs to be done in America? The answer will dissolve the "professional problem."

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