

In democratic countries, as de Tocqueville saw things, the art-buying and appreciating public have few such inherited standards to guide their interaction with the often equally isolated artists. Lacking secure social standing grounded in considerations other than purchasing power, the customer in the democratic society typically wants not high quality but "a look of brilliance." Since democratic competition always produces a "crowd of citizens whose desires outstrip their means," the common interest of craftsman and customer alike is to make, buy, and sell the most products possible as cheaply as they can. There are few institutional supports for standards of excellence that could counter or qualify the activities of either producer or customer. The whole artistic enterprise tends to become *only* a market, directed not by aesthetic values as such but by the pursuit of maximum financial gain. Thus, de Tocqueville concluded, in both the fine and useful arts "quantity increases; quality goes down."¹⁶

What makes this analysis particularly striking is that de Tocqueville could have been describing the problems faced by responsible free professionals in nineteenth-century America. The root of the professional problem, like that of the arts, stemmed from the anomalous status of the professions in a utilitarian commercial society, a situation they shared with the arts, education, and religion. In the first place, a profession is "in business" for more than itself. In the case of the professions of office, this was inherent in becoming a public official. For the free professions, however, the situation was more ambiguous. Professionals competed, after all, in the labor market and typically offered their services in exchange for a fee. Yet they explicitly served public, even transcendent, ends. Public values are necessary in order to secure the goods of civilized life, but they can be secured for each citizen only when all, or nearly all, citizens contribute to their support. This is plain in the simple case of a public good such as security. If there is too little general contribution in the form of law-abiding mutual trust, then individuals find themselves put on a defensive posture, forced to restrict contact

with strangers and dependent upon private defenses, in an escalating spiral of defense and withdrawal until the once-sought public good is lost altogether.

For the nineteenth-century free professions, the problem was to convince not only the public at large but also the mercenaries and eccentrics calling themselves doctors, lawyers, and preachers to act toward their clients with fiduciary responsibility. The *laissez-faire* environment of American life made it difficult to establish the idea that to be a professional means acting in the interest of one's client. The client often depends on the wisdom and integrity of the professional's judgment. The professional, by contrast, cannot be simply the client's tool or instrument. The professional is accountable to the client as to whether the former is serving the latter's best interests, but the professional is also accountable for the public purpose for which the profession exists. Thus the lawyer is rightly called a counselor and attorney, since the lawyer's task is to apply trained judgment in acting for the client in seeking his or her best interest in regard to justice. The same is true in the case of the physician with regard to health, and similar responsibilities apply to the other professions.

The common problem for the free professions was—and is—to establish and safeguard standards of practice that ensure public authority and confidence. But how could this be done in so militantly egalitarian and utilitarian a society, and when so many would-be professionals were either incompetent or venal, or both? The problem paralleled the one de Tocqueville traced for the arts. In practice, the choice was between seeking to establish individual professional authority through personal charisma or seeking to persuade public opinion of the value of granting and enforcing fiduciary responsibility to a professional body. The former strategy was the dominant one through the middle of the nineteenth century. Much in the manner of celebrity painters or musicians, leading lawyer-orators, star preachers, and celebrated doctors became influential, and sometimes wealthy and powerful, figures.

W. Sullivan, Work and Integrity

But the unmet challenge, one more in keeping with the civic mission of professionalism, was to educate public opinion toward institutionalizing professional standards through such devices as licensure and accountability. This strategy depended upon many professionals' and their nascent societies' assuming the role of civic actors so as to spread and win acceptance for a vision of reciprocal responsibility between professionals and the public. When this effort succeeded, it did so mostly where professionals were able to make of themselves valued members of the local civic culture. However, later in the century professionals would finally begin to gain public stature on a national scale not so much by identifying themselves with public ends and fiduciary responsibility (though these values played a role) but through their embrace of the increasingly spectacular achievements of science and technological progress.

Authority Through Expertise: The Organizational Professions

The Civil War that Lincoln waged to save the Union did more than destroy the slave society of the Old South. It set in motion forces that would rapidly change American life almost beyond recognition. Under Lincoln's leadership, the United States began to come to a sense of itself as a single nation. In the ensuing decades, the nation would expand geographically and yet also grow closer toward forming a unified society. What was at the time of the war a dispersed agrarian and rural nation, boasting a few commercial cities and industrial centers, would become the world's leading industrial power by century's end.

In the process, vast migrations to the West, immigration from Europe, construction of national systems of technologically advanced communication and transport, and the burgeoning of unprecedented industrial cities would call into being new forms of human organization hardly imagined in antebellum America. Work moved out of the household into the shop, factory, and office. It was

less the self-reliant independent citizen and more the self-made entrepreneur looking for the main chance who set the pace. The expanding national market made possible the sudden rise of fierce captains of industry. Their quest for dominance opened the testing ground for new organizations exemplified by the railroad and the industrial corporation.

By 1900, the chaos of economic laissez-faire was being recast by the leaders of business and finance, and fitfully encouraged by government, into a new mold historians describe as the age of corporation capitalism. Economic life came to be regarded as less a field of random forces and more an interconnected system on whose management national prosperity depended. The key institution through which these changes were taking place was the business corporation itself, "a form of organization designed to accumulate large amounts of capital, resources, and labor and apply them to the rational, planned conduct of economic activity through a division of labor and bureaucratic routine."¹⁷ The principles embodied in the corporation would spread widely (though not without resistance) throughout American society and give rise to new forms of professional life. Everywhere groups sought economic stability and protection from the punishing unpredictabilities of the unregulated market. They formed associations and organizations to give themselves market shelters, areas of activity protected by law or contractual agreement from encroachment by competitors from other sectors of the economy. The result was an upsurge of agricultural cooperatives, trade unions, and new or revived professional organizations.¹⁸

This was a social environment considerably more receptive to aspects of the professional enterprise than antebellum America had been. If Jacksonian Americans thought about opportunity largely in the horizontal terms of an expanding frontier for self-reliant household enterprise, increasing numbers of Americans would come to understand opportunity in vertical terms. The image fit with the reality of a career in a large and impersonal organization, operating as part of a national system and taking over area after area of economic life.

The new era was to be the age of the career. The stability of a career in a prestigious occupation lifted those who could attain educational credentials toward the possibility of dignified and well-paid work within the expanding national network of commerce. The new universities, themselves sometimes founded or funded by the wealthy creators of the corporation economy, were critical to this development.¹⁹ Professionalism, often defined less as a civic art and more as the capacity to solve technical problems, would over time enable the middle class to make peace with the plutocrats. The unsettled social conditions of the time also created the opportunity for enterprising profession builders to persuade influential publics of their value to the nation.

For this was also the age of the expert. The organizational professions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as engineering and management, introduced into the professional enterprise a new emphasis upon science, efficiency, and technical expertise. The expert (in the sense in which Americans of the nineteenth century might have recognized the term) was typically the learned judge, the theologian, the scientific scholar, the ingenious inventor who benefited the community. Such expertise derived from learning, and often from demonstrated practical wisdom as well. It carried overtones of the fiduciary qualities characteristic of the professions of office and the free professions. In its new sense, however, expertise connoted someone who knew how to get things done, the person able to wield sophisticated techniques as means to produce desired ends. At its most expansive, the new notion of expertise meant the capacity to solve problems, the kind of skill that expanding industrial America greatly needed and very much admired.

"Little noticed in the heat of the nineties," wrote Robert Wiebe, "a new middle class was rapidly gathering strength." That "class . . . covering too wide a range to form a tightly knit group" included significant groups of those "with strong professional aspirations in such fields as medicine, law, economics, administration, social work, and architecture." Notice that this list includes not

only two of the three traditional professions but such newcomers as academic social science and professionalized administration. Wiebe also noted that "consciousness of unique skills and functions, an awareness that came to mold much of their lives, characterized all members of the class."²⁰ This was to be professionalism's heroic age, when it came forward as a new American moral ideal. It was also a time of major conflict over the meaning of professionalism. That conflict would result, by the early decades of the twentieth century, in identification of professionalism in many fields with technical expertise, to the detriment of the civic orientation characteristic of earlier professional ideals. This development continues to produce negative effects today for the larger society as well as within the professions.

What made possible the appearance of the organizational professions, far more tied to large formal organizations than the free professions were, was a revolution in both social organization and attitudes toward specialization. The change, though, was not accomplished easily or without painful conflict. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the organizational professions were born out of profound social crisis. By the late nineteenth century, many Americans could no longer make sense of their social world in the inherited terms of their local civic creed or through the idiom of open opportunity. As farmers and townsfolk were drawn into the geographic and cultural orbit of the industrial metropolis, the familiar idea that some benign natural harmony underlay the apparent randomness of market society was in retreat. Those who could make sense of things were suddenly in demand. Social analysts and prophets abounded.

It seemed clear to all that the optimistic republican dream of a harmonious and classless civic community was being torn to pieces in conflict between opposed economic interests. Members of the middle class felt themselves caught in a squeeze. On all sides, they saw powerful forces that were essentially outside their familiar cultural and political world.²¹ The middle class was horrified by class struggle, sensing that it marked the end of the old American ideal of civic community. The United States was changing dramatically