‘Professionalisation in terminal decline? Think again’

Abstract

In this presentation I explore recent trends in the evolution of professional modes of regulation and question the assumption that such regulation is in terminal decline. My starting point is the notion of occupational strategies, derived from the work of Reed (1996) and how these may be changing. Specifically, Reed (1996) suggests that the dominant strategy of ‘Independent/liberal professions’ has been one focused on monopolisation and occupational closure. This represents a distinctive way of organising in the labor market whereby members of an occupation rather than consumers or employers retain control over the definition, performance and evaluation of their work. However, it is argued that this occupational strategy of ‘monopolization’ is rapidly losing its potency in a context of neo-liberal political and economic ideologies which have “threatened the expert claims of professional groups and the logic of professional organization as an alternative to and protector of client and public welfare” (Leicht, 2015). This view is reflected in many grand narratives of professional decline (Reed, 1996; 2007; Brint, 1994; Leicht and Fennel, 2001). Most emphasise the unwillingness of governments to tolerate or support forms of professional monopoly in new and emerging areas of expert work and, where such monopoly already exists, a desire to reign back professional forms of self-regulation. Either way it is suggested that the traditional model of ‘Independent/liberal professions’ has become increasingly less attractive or feasible in the current context.

In this presentation I will critique this account and provide an alternative. While recognising how in many areas professional autonomy to self-regulate has been rolled back in a number of key areas (such as medicine and law), I argue that established forms of labour market closure are more robust than is previously assumed. To illustrate this, I draw on a variety of (mainly quantitative) secondary sources which highlight the continued appeal of professionalization strategies in the US. Specifically I focus on two main proxies: historical trends in the formation of professional associations and changes in the number and nature of professionally-led certification programmes. This analysis highlights key sources of continuity as well as change in the organisation of professions and that professional strategies and related forms of occupational closure are evolving rather than eroding. In the concluding section I assess some of the factors that might explain this apparent continuity and discuss the wider theoretical implications.

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