

Professionalism as Legitimizing Ideology

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Professionalism, as a friend of mine once put it, is the last refuge of scoundrels.

The concept of professionalism has achieved an unprecedented hegemony in society at large. For a very large part of the population, one's identity as a professional is the main source of reference.

People commonly, in situations where they are required to sum themselves up, simply identify themselves as professional. The "professional" self-designation appears in the same social contexts as "citizen" did fifty years ago. In the 1950s, it was common for someone to refer to himself, in situations completely removed from politics or government, as "just an ordinary citizen," or the like. Today, for many in the white collar middle class, it's "a professional." Professionalism has acquired the same ideological significance once held by civic culture and citizenship. In either case, the individual was defined in terms of some particular authority relation in which he existed.

Letters to advice columnists are commonly introduced by some phrase like this: "Dear Abby, my husband and I are both professionals in our 40s..." The implied subtext, of course, is "...so obviously this isn't something we caused by our own stupidity," or "...so this is a legitimate problem, unlike the idiocy you get from most of the beer-swilling yahoos who read your column."

The concept of the profession has also largely supplanted that of the skilled trade in the occupational realm. The adjective "professional" is used almost exclusively to describe work or behavior that would previously have been described as "businesslike," or characterized by a sense of craftsmanship. "Professional" and "unprofessional" are used as words of praise and blame, respectively, in occupations that were never regarded as professions back when the term had any meaning. People in virtually all white collar or service jobs, regardless of the level of training associated with them, are expected to display "professionalism" in their work attitudes and dress.

The concept of "professionalism" has spread like a cancer and contaminated most occupations. Originally, the culture of the professions grew out of the skilled trades. A master of arts, for example, was analogous to a master of any other trade, with bachelors and undergraduates corresponding to journeymen and apprentices; a university was a place where one apprenticed to a master scholar. I'd be happy to compromise on the original five professions—letters, medicine, law, holy orders, and arms—if we could reclaim the concept of the skilled trade for everything else.

So why has professionalism so successfully colonized the entire realm of work? Who benefits from promoting it as an ideology? What functions does it serve?

The fundamental purpose of professionalism, like that of any other ideology, is to get people's minds right—in this case, workers.

Professionalism fosters a house-slave mentality by getting large categories of workers to identify with management (Good ole Massa knows we're really like him, white on the inside—we're not like those shiftless old field slaves), setting white collar against blue collar workers, and enabling management to rule through a divide-and-conquer strategy. There's a saying that a dishonest man is the easiest target for a con artist. Likewise, it's a lot easier to oppress a status-insecure snob.

Professionalism undermines the separation of work and home. Throughout the entire service sector, increasingly, low-paid wage workers are expected to think of their job as a calling, and of customer service as something to sacrifice "ownlife" for. In nursing, an occupation that fell under the spell of professionalism long ago, this is old news. For all of living memory, hospital managements have cynically manipulated nurses' concern for their patients to guilt them into working unwanted overtime. This is often done, deliberately, in preference to hiring enough staff to avoid overtime, because it economizes on the costs of benefits.

But now the same levels of selfless "professional" dedication are required in some of the lowest levels of the two-tier economy. For example, consider Wal-Mart's abortive 24/7 availability policy at a store in South Carolina, which required people with shitty \$8/hour retail jobs to live on call the same way that only doctors used to. The policy was abandoned in the face of public protest, and is not yet adopted as a policy at any level above the individual stores; but apparently it's been required in other Wal-Mart stores as well, and is probably the wave of the future if the bosses can get away with it. Here's how a store manager justified the policy, in terms of the values of "professional" dedication:

"We have many people with set schedules who aren't here when we need them for our customers," said John Knuckles [!], a manager at the store, which is located in the Nitro Marketplace shopping center and employs more than 400.

"It is to take care of the customers, that's the only reason," he said.

Workers who have had regular shifts at the store for years now have to commit to being available for any shift from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., seven days a week. If they can't make the commitment by the end of this week, they'll be fired.

"It shouldn't cause any problem, if they [store employees] are concerned about their customers," Knuckles said [emphasis added].

Ken Blanchard has expressed great dissatisfaction with the TGIF mentality, speaking for many managers who resent their workers' view of the job as a means to an end, and of their life in the outside world as the end their job serves. As Blanchard put it in his introduction to the *Fish!* Philosophy book, "too many people are trading time on the job to satisfy needs elsewhere..." Imagine that! People view going to a place where they're treated like shit, worked like fucking dogs, and required to take orders as a necessary evil, rather than looking forward to it as the central source of meaning in their lives. Next, he'll be complaining about the people in prison who count down the days until they get out. Come to think of it, I guess it's only a matter of

time until prison inmates join the ranks of “professionals,” and are expected to volunteer for “overtime” after they complete their sentences. After all, a good professional is willing to do whatever it takes to avoid inconveniencing all those customers who are waiting on their license plates or laundry.

Finally, management tries to identify “professionalism” with obedience and docility. This means, in concrete terms, that talking back to management and fighting for one’s rights are forms of conduct unbecoming “professionals.” Pressuring management to improve working conditions, reduce hours, increase staffing or pay, and the like, are the kinds of “low-class” behavior that proles engage in. In the old days, before the metastatic spread of professionalism, professions tended to maintain a collegiate mentality, an internal solidarity, against the demands of authority, much like the master craftsmen who resisted the watering down of quality in the industrial revolution. A professional might resist unreasonable demands from outside, like a demand to do substandard work or cut corners to compensate for understaffing, because of professional pride. Today, outside the old-line professions, professionalism has ceased to be a moral basis for resistance to authority, and instead become another force for promoting obedience.

This aspect of professionalism gets back to the divide and conquer function I mentioned above: “professionalism” means seeing oneself in the same social category as management (albeit at a lower rung), and part of the same “team.”

Again, it’s the vicarious self-esteem acquired by a house slave who identifies with the owner rather than with the field slaves. It’s just another example of the more general phenomenon of the authoritarian personality: the oppressed overcomes his sense of oppression by identifying with the oppressor and directing his resentment, instead, against out-groups helpfully identified for him by those in authority. For the authoritarian personality, the bad guy is not the one whose rules he suffers under, but rather the one who seeks to change those rules or evade them. In the eye of the authoritarian, the rebel is the real enemy because he thinks he is better than all the others who have had to suffer from the rules.

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