

“THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY” OF PROFESSIONS: OVERVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF PROFESSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a brief overview of the history of research in the field of the sociology of professions. It presents the development of sociological theoretical approaches in the study of professions, its main research areas, basic concepts over time, and changes in the definition of profession itself over time. Beginning with a short outline of the classical theories in which sociological studying of professions finds its origins, the article proceeds with a more detailed presentation of the three main approaches and development stages of sociology of professions – the functionalist, the interactionalist and the social conflict. Apart from presenting the main research focuses of these approaches, this article also explores different concepts and views of profession, beginning with the “profession” in functionalism, moving on to the “professionalization” in interactionism and ending with the “professionalism” in the social conflict phase. Following this transformation, the article also describes the shift from profession’s initially socially constructive to rather obstructive image over the years and across the approaches. Finally, it reflects on the thesis of the “death” of the discipline and research field of the sociology of professions and reviews contemporary approaches to the subject that are either turning mainly into micro studies of specific professions or falling out of the field of sociology and becoming the research focus of disciplines seeking to maintain or establish the status of being a profession themselves.

KEY WORDS

profession, sociology of professions, functionalism, interactionalism, social conflict, micro studies

CLASSIFICATION

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INTRODUCTION

Although there is no generally accepted definition of the term profession and there is a controversy in the scientific community about what distinguishes it from the term “occupation”, what can be said with certainty is that the roots of the research of professions, as well as of professionalization and professionalism, can be found in sociology [1; p.9]. In fact, it is precisely on the basis of establishing that specific distinction between occupation and profession, that sociology of professions developed as a separate discipline within the wider field of sociology of work [2; p.47]. The rise of the sociology of professions can be traced to the 1950s and 1960s [3, 4] when efforts were made to identify all of the traits that characterize a profession, but also to finally clarify its differences from occupation, with researchers mostly focusing on researching specific professions and the characteristics of their representatives. By doing so, some of the researchers have completely bypassed providing a definition of the profession and instead focused on listing relevant occupational groups that can be called professions. Some have however used this disagreement over the definition of profession to challenge the very need of existence of the specific study field as such, thus equating the concept of profession with that of occupation [3; p.135]. Along with this contrasting and even contradictory use of the term profession in the sociological literature [5; p.399], some authors, such as Broadbent et al. in 1997, Krause in 1996, Kritzer in 1999, and Nolin in 2008, go as far as claiming that the sociology of professions as a field has been perishing since the 2000s, marking the period after as the end of professions and the death of professionalism [6]. Despite that, even a basic inquiry of the Scopus and Web of Science databases indicates that the number of sociological papers, as well as those in other related disciplines, covering the topics of professions and professionalism have been increasing in the last 15 years [7, 8].

For that very reason the review of the development and history of research in the sociology of professions, and thus the overview of the basic shifts in the definition of profession and its distinction from occupation, will be the main focus of this article. Beginning with a short outline of the classical theories of Durkheim and Weber which represent the theoretical basis, this article proceeds with a more detailed presentation of the three main theoretical streams, i.e. approaches and development stages of the sociology of professions, and the different definitions of profession and research focuses present in periods of their respective prevalence. The article also reflects on the thesis of the “death” of the discipline and research field of the sociology of professions and concludes with an overview of its more contemporary approaches.

CLASSICAL THEORIES – THE INCEPTION OF PROFESSIONS RESEARCH IN SOCIOLOGY

The theoretical origin of the sociological study of professions is found in Durkheim’s theory of the division of labour in society, originally published in 1893, which explains the processes of the growing complexity of social structure. The theory is based on the differentiation of traditional and modern societies, where the former are defined by low levels of division of labour and by mechanical solidarity, while the latter are characterised by a high division of labour and organic solidarity. This high division of labour and the increasingly important role of knowledge lead to the creation of a new social group as its holder – professionals [9; p.9]. According to Durkheim, this social group was supposed to represent a paragon of moral order and the solution to anomie through the existence of professional associations as voluntary organisations that manage the practical activities of professions thorough a clearly established code of conduct and an acquired sense of duty and responsibility towards the community [10; p.693]. Through control and education, such associations promote conduct in accordance to professional standards and ethics, but also have the power of prohibiting the practice for

individuals who do not comply to these regulations. Professionals are therefore obliged to act in the best interest of their clients or the society in general, not in their own, and it is precisely this altruism, thoughtfulness, and overall contribution to society that, according to Durkheim, justify professionals' high income and status [10].

Income and social status are also some of the characteristics of professional groups mentioned by Weber who views occupations as a status group holding different extent of wealth, prestige, and power in society. In that way the members of some professional group are rewarded with a similar level of honour and have the same social status, i.e. they have a similar lifestyle, they identify with, and feel they belong to their status group, while often being quite restrictive regarding the ways outsiders and non-members of the group can interact with them [10; p.37]. Weber viewed professions from structural, processual, and power perspective, and as an important factor in development of Western rationalization, capitalism, and bureaucracy, but also of a variety of institutions. In fact, he viewed the relationship between professions and institutions as two-sided, where "professionals contributed to the rationalization of these institutions and, conversely, the rationalizing institutions contributed to the development of the professions" [11; p.628]. On the example of law and priesthood, he demonstrated how the rational legal and church systems developed out of trained specialists' cooperation, while the consequential ever-increasing need for specialized knowledge and vocational qualifications created professional lawyers and priests [11]. Like Durkheim, he emphasized the importance of professional training system that distinguishes e.g. priests and lawyers who possess it from sorcerers and "legal craftsmen" and their irrational and empirical training [11; p.631]. In that way, he also defines characteristics the occupation must have to become a profession. However, unlike Durkheim, Weber claimed that in reality, as with all the ideal types, there is no clear difference between profession and occupation. Apart from that, he stated the power as the main factor for occupation's position on that professional continuum. It's exactly this that denotes the main difference between Weber's and Durkheim's, and later the Weberian and functionalist, understanding of professions and professionals' role in the society.

The functionalist approach is thus based on the assumption that entering a profession implies acquiring systematic and general knowledge applicable to a wide spectre of problems, but also caring for and acting in the interest of society. The presence and sustainability of these professional traits are ensured by the existence of a code of ethics, crated and re-evaluated by professional associations, which keep the behaviour of professionals under strict control since its violation can be sanctioned by the expulsion from the association and/or the ban of practice. According to the functionalist approach this is the main reason professionals enjoy social rewards in the form of prestige and high income which reflects professionals' contribution to society's well-being [10; p.60].

Contrary to this understanding of professions and professionals as socially beneficial, the Weberian approach rests on the premise that professional groups act primarily in their own interest, not society's. According to this approach professionals manage to gain control over a particular segment of the labour market and later manipulate it to secure their own profits. The profession thus, in some way, represents a strategic control of a particular occupation over some specific form of economic activity or practice, all to advance the interests of its representatives. This control is secured by the profession's entry restriction achieved through education and gained qualification supervision but also through the maintenance of a steady number of professionals in order to ensure a high demand for their services and consequently the retention of their social rewards. While functionalists believe the role of professional associations to be a mechanism of professionals' control of behaviour and insurance of their societal contribution, the Weberian approach sees their goal in the advancing of the

professional group's interests while falsely presenting the professional conduct as impeccable and committed to public service. Even the sanctioning of members who violate professional regulations is, by the Weberian approach, perceived as a way in which professionals prevent public questioning of their actions and maintain a positive image in society, again all with the purpose of justifying high income and reputation. Apart from that, this approach highlights that the development of a profession itself implies establishing the monopoly of its members on the supply of certain services which consequently deters competing occupational groups threatening that monopoly. Therefore, the basic difference between professional groups enjoying greater social rewards and other occupational groups that do not, lays in the fact that the former were more successful in controlling their own market setting [10; p.61].

Although, as mentioned earlier, Durkheim's and Weber's classical theories represent the origins of sociological study of professions, professions themselves were not in their focus, but were placed in the broader context of comprehensive sociological theories. The beginnings of sociology of professions as a separate discipline can be found in the first half of the 20th century [6] and its main research streams and theoretical approaches will be the central focus of the next chapter.

MAIN RESEARCH STREAMS IN THE FIELD OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF PROFESSIONS

Although the early development of sociology of professions can be traced back to the 1930s, when the first research on professions as specific forms of occupation began, more elaborate attempts in defining professions' development, at least in the West, began between the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence of the so-called taxonomic approach which implies that professions possess a range of characteristics which distinguish them from other occupations [3-4, 12].

A simple search of the term “profession” in the Scopus citation database also sets the beginning of research on professions in the 1950s, when the number of articles on the subject reached 267, and in 1951 even 585, which is a significant increase compared to 1949 when their number was 58, or previous years when it averaged 30 per year [7]. The same search in the Web of Science database shows that the number of papers with this topic in 1950 and 1951 was 221 and 563, while only one year earlier, in 1949, number of such papers was 67 [8]. This is in line with Tracey L. Adams' research [13] of Sociological Abstract and SocIndex databases using the terms “professions”, “sociology of professions” and “professions and professionalization” that also showed a steady growth of such publications since the 1950s.

Although listed by different names and with different prevalence periods, most authors divide the field of sociology of professions into three phases or three basic theoretical approaches – the functionalist, interactionist and the conflict one [1, 2, 6, 11, 14]. Each of these phases can be linked to a then prominent key research concept from which a paradigm shift in the sociology of professions over the years can be clearly seen. While the first phase was associated with the concept of “profession” and its representatives mostly focused on its definition, the second one was defined by the concept of “professionalism” and its authors concentrated on the development of professions. Finally, the third phase tasked itself with conceptualizing “professionalism” and problematizing issues of different power levels among occupations. Because of that, the mentioned phases are sometimes referred to as the “trait approach”, the “process approach”, and the “power approach” [2], as will be described in more detail in further text.

Apart from that, as it will also be seen further on, the very perception of profession and its role in society across these approaches shifted significantly, beginning with the confidently constructive and community serving one in functionalist phase, and ending with the (at least for other occupations) obstructive one in the social conflict phase. In that way, the functionalist, and

to an extent the interactionist, approach perceive professions as occupations with significant contribution to society and certain characteristics that rightfully set them apart from other occupations and provide them with different social rewards. The conflict or power approach, on the other hand, rests on the idea that there is no great difference between occupations and professions, apart from the power the latter managed to gain at the expense of former. Hence, it can be said that through the years and across different phases in the development of the sociology of professions the image of professions was slowly shifting from “good” to “bad”.

THE GOOD: FUNCTIONALISM AND “PROFESSION” (1930-1970)

The, previously briefly described, functionalist approach in the sociological research of professions, dominant in the period from the 1930s to the 1970s, is also called the trait or taxonomic approach, as it seeks to determine the attributes and characteristics that distinguish professions from other occupations, thus classifying occupations according to the attributes they do or do not possess [2]. This approach, as some authors [3, 4, 6, 13] also call Anglo-American approach, is based on Durkheim’s perception of the profession, and its origin, as the one of the discipline of sociology of professions itself, can be found in the work of Alexander Carr-Saunders and Paul Wilson from 1933, who sought to identify the similarities of 30 occupations with a similar organization and scientifically based knowledge [1, 11, 14].

The very concept of **profession**, according to this approach, represents a special and generic category of occupation, which is exactly why the period from 1930 to 1970 was marked by authors who sought to provide a definition of the profession and determine what distinguishes it from occupation and makes it unique [4].

The most influential representative of the functionalist period was Talcott Parsons who in 1954 argued that professions possess certain criteria, such as emotional neutrality and equal treatment of all clients (universalism), working for the common good, not one’s own interests (impartiality), loyalty to a professional group, specialization for certain issues and the acquisition of social status based on the ability of professionals rather than inheritance, which separates them from the practitioners of other occupations. Parsons in some way set the “ideal type” of the profession [12], and numerous other researchers, e.g. Greenwood in 1957, Wilensky in 1964, and Etzioni in 1969 [3-4], following him, tried to identify “real” professions and compile lists of their attributes. These lists mainly included higher education and expertise, but also other less obvious characteristics, such as a positive impact on the community, the existence of a code of ethics, altruism, rationality, and credentials [12].

In that way, Greenwood in his work [15], referring to the enduring efforts of social workers in transforming their occupation into a profession, compiled an influential list of profession’s criteria which includes systematic knowledge, professional authority and credibility, member regulation and control, ethical code, and professional culture. Greenwood argued that although some occupations require more complicated and more difficult skills to master than professions, the most important distinction between professional and nonprofessional skills lies in the fact that former ones arise from and are supported by theoretical knowledge usually gained in the academic system [15; p.46]. It is precisely this extensive theoretical knowledge, as opposed to the general ignorance of the average person, that becomes the basis of professional authority which is, according to Greenwood, apparent through some curious features, one being the fact that occupations have customers and profession clients. The customer has the freedom to choose which service or product he wants to purchase because it is assumed that he has the capacity to accommodate his needs. The client on the other hand does not have that choice and must agree to what professional estimates is in his best interest [15; pp.47-48]. Following the professional authority, the formal and informal control the profession

establishes, and society then supports, is the next professional trait on Greenwood’s list. This control encompasses the regulation of the education system, i.e. the number and place of institutions, curriculum, and lecturers’ selection, and the regulation of the very entry into the profession, i.e. completion of the required education and obtaining a license. It is important to emphasize that the societal support of this control is reflected in the fact that violations of the said regulation are sanctioned, not only by the ethical professional committees, but also by government bodies. This points out to an essential aspect of profession’s power, its monopoly, supported by the community in which it operates [15; p.49]. Like profession’s control, professional code of ethics, as the following criteria, can also be both formal and informal. The first refers to the written code itself to which many professionals give an oath to, while the second implies unwritten rules. Both are there to ensure professionals’ commitment to the common good and consequentially maintain community’s trust and their monopoly. All codes of ethic describe the relations between professionals and their client, but also among professionals themselves. Here Greenwood highlights the importance of professionals obeying what Parsons called the elements of universalism and disinterestedness while working with clients, in a sense that they must provide their service to whomever requests it in a best possible way. The elements that should be an essential part of the relationship between colleagues are cooperation, equality, and support through knowledge and theoretical and practical advances, sharing, referral and consultations [15; p.49]. Finally, Greenwood’s last element of profession refers to the membership and interactions in numerous formal and informal professional groups. These groups, such as professional associations and educational or research centres, generate and maintain professional culture which comprises values, norms, and symbols. The values of a professional group in that sense mark the basic beliefs shared by its members, norms include behavioural instructions for specific situations, while symbols encompass different markings, emblems, characteristic clothing and uniforms, history, specific jargon, stereotypes, etc. [15; pp.51-52].

Greenwood, among other representatives of the taxonomic approach, claimed that the differences between occupations are more quantitative than qualitative, meaning that there is no clear line between occupation and profession and rather that some occupations are simply closer to or further from the ideal type of profession. This and latter similar lists of professional characteristics have in some way set the normative standard for occupations and their representatives who seek to acquire the status of profession [9, 1]. Similarly, in 1958 Hughes argued that the basic difference between occupation and profession is not in their categorization or kind, but in their gradation [3-4]. This kind of functionalistic reasoning of trait approach eventually led to the definition of not only professions, but also semi-professions [9, 1] that, unlike other occupations with a low degree of professional traits development, possess some professional attributes, but not all as do “pure” or real professions.

Since, for that reason, many occupations have sought to gain a professional status, the research focus in sociology of professions slowly started to shift from that of profession and its traits to that of professionalization [1]. This occurred in parallel with the emergence of numerous critics directed functionalism as a sociological theory in general and thus the functionalist approach in sociology of professions and its search of differences between occupations and professions which are, by the 1960s, starting to be considered useless and futile [2].

STILL QUITE GOOD: INTERACTIONISM AND “PROFESSIONALIZATION” (1960-1980)

As one of the first and best-known critiques of the functionalist approach to professions interactionism can be singled out. As already mentioned, this approach builds on the concept of profession and professional attributes and turns to **professionalization** as a dynamic process through

which occupations obtain the status of profession [1, 2, 4]. This is exactly the reason why this approach is sometimes referred to as the process one. Such a process encompasses efforts in achieving the closure of occupation and its maintenance, all in order to attain the interests of its members in terms of higher salary and social status and power, but also to protect the monopoly over that occupation's jurisdiction [4]. With this kind of research focus, interactionism also moves away from the observation of differences between occupations and professions and turns to their similarities instead. In that way interactionism representatives perceive functionalist traits and characteristics of professions as deceptions that legitimize professional domination and specialty without empirical verification [12]. The concept of profession is thus, in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, viewed as an ideological construct [4].

Despite their strong criticisms directed at the functionalist or taxonomic approach, authors who focused on professionalization also borrowed some of its key postulates. Accordingly, one of the most prominent representatives of this phase, and sociology of professions in general, Eliot Freidson defines a profession as "an occupation which has assumed a dominant position in a division of labour, so that it gains control over the determination of the substance of its own work" [16; p.xv]. In his work he focuses on medicine because, according to him, it only, even considering law and priesthood that are also considered to be traditional professions, can be viewed as a prototype of profession to which all the occupations seeking a privileged status look up to. Freidson thus believed that a better understanding of medicine will enable him to better understand all the problems of professionalization of other occupations as well, especially those in the health and social care systems, such as nursing and social work [16; p.xvi].

By studying medicine and its development, Freidson determines the criteria, i.e. steps, that occupations must go through in order to become a high-status profession, with the first and most important one being autonomy and self-management combined with the possession of a certain authority from which the control of education, clients and other occupations, that is competition elimination, arises. Similar to the approach of taxonomic representatives, Freidson emphasizes that the profession enjoys a special status in the community and has its trust, but also that it demands the ethical conduct and the possession of certain knowledge and specific skills. Like Greenwood, he states that professions enjoy the status of the most reliable authority in a certain labour market sphere which is reflected in the inherent "professional" treatment of the client and their problems. In that way the profession creates a new social reality and with its own autonomous position in society gains the power to change the lay world [16; p.xv]. It is precisely because of the above mentioned that Freidson assumes that the sociologists' job is primarily to determine the way in which the profession acquires, organizes and maintains this type of autonomy and self-regulation, and secondly to gain insight into the relationship of professional knowledge with its organization and the community in which it operates [16; pp.xv-xvi]. Aware of the impossibility of fully generalizing the conclusions derived from the observation of one profession (in his case the medicine), Freidson emphasizes the necessity of studying professions on an abstract level which will prevent the mixing of general characteristics of all professions with those of a particular one. He also advocates the use of analytical concepts that enable the comparison of professions and highlights that sociological study of professions should not focus on variable professional elements, such as specific knowledge, beliefs, and skills, but on the means of professional organizations. The generality of professional organization arises from its authoritarian position in society and its autonomy that enables the profession to transform and create the content and conditions of its work even when it is partially under the state's control, as is the case with the medicine [16; p.xvii]. Although Freidson's work manifests an apparent shift from the work of authors of the taxonomic phase and shows indications of the

upcoming conflict phase, which will be presented later, it still emphasizes certain criteria occupations should meet to become professions.

In a similar manner other authors of the interactionist approach use successive models according to which occupations become professions by going through certain steps, such as organization of full-time work, acquisition of knowledge and skills in the specialised institutions, foundation of professional associations, adoption of professional standards, and licence obtainment [2]. However, in addition to enumerating the steps in the process of professionalization some authors of this approach, such as Abbott in 1988, claim that occupations evolve according to a certain structural and cultural pattern of professional control. The structural part, in that sense, consists of numerous associating, control and working organizations, which, according to some authors, develop exactly in that order. In a cultural aspect, professions gain control by attaching their expertise to universally accepted values, to be exact, those of rationality, efficiency, and science. Abbott also enumerates the stages of profession's development which include the existence of (national) professional association, licence, professional exam, university-based education clearly separated from the education for other occupations, ethical code, and national level journal [1].

Since professions have not had an equal development in different countries, Abbott's idea of the natural evolution of professions has proven itself to be based on the assumption that occupations evolve only in one direction, the one towards the ideal type of professions. In this way the process of professionalization is viewed as independent of external factors, such as the socio-historical context and the relationship between competing occupations [1].

Precisely this disregard of the influence of context-specific factors presents the principal critique of the interactionist approach. It rests on the fact this universalistic view of professionalism in interactionism did not take into consideration the specificities of different professions and the context of their economic activity which is, according to critics of this approach, largely marked by the struggle to gain power amongst other occupations.

THE BAD: SOCIAL CONFLICT AND “PROFESSIONALISM” (1980-1990)

Because of that power struggle this period of criticism, both of the researchers' focused on profession's characteristic and those studying the process of professionalization, is called the conflict or power approach or sometimes even neo-Weberian or neo-Marxist one. It is marked by the view of professions as actors in the economic space who gain or lose the exclusivity on providing some sort of service, but also the jurisdiction over certain segment of the service market through monopolization and its closure [2]. Unlike the taxonomic approach, this one offers an empirical basis for the assessment of the real role of knowledge, expertise, and other traits of profession, while unlike interactionism, in its analysis of professions it includes the macrostructural and historical processes that support or prevent the process of professionalization [12].

Authors representing this phase, such as Parry and Parry in 1976, Larson in 1977, and Collins in 1990, build on Weber's concept of status groups, recognizing their important role in the division of labour and market structuring. Starting from this, their theories highlight the fact that occupational structures are constantly changing and that there is a constant struggle between different occupations over various resources and privileges [1]. In other words, according to the conflict approach, professions are exclusive groups effective in closing off some part of the labour market, while the professionalization in that way represents a successful legal regulation and an establishment of boundaries that preserve the position of the profession in the market, but also the position of its members in society, i.e. their income, status and power. In that way, for example, in 1972 Johnson describes the profession as the control producers (of

services) establish over their customers. Parry and Parry in 1976 define it as a self-governing group's market control over certain services, while Freidson in 1994 sees it as their legitimate and organized autonomy over specific techniques and organization of work [12].

In their book Parry and Parry link professionalism with class theory within the wider context of collective social mobility again, like Freidson in the interactionist phase, on the example of the medical profession [17]. According to the authors, medicine represents the middle-class occupation that was, considering the domination of the Marxist perspective and the prevalent polarization thesis, neglected at the time since sociological research was mainly focused on the working and higher class. Parry and Parry emphasize that, unlike the individual, the group aspect of social stratification has often been neglected in sociology [17; p.3]. They go on to say that the middle-class mobility is a group rather than individual phenomenon and that turning to the group aspect of middle-class mobility enables a better understanding of its newly acquired bourgeois status. Through the review of previous work on professional mobility (e.g. Glass in 1954 and Sorokin in 1927), authors come to the conclusion that it is its individual aspect that was predominantly studied in the context of an individual acquiring a certain status upon entering the profession regardless of the one he gained by birth [17]. Parry and Parry do not deny this ability of breaking into the higher status group, they merely extend it to the professional groups themselves. In that way they define professionalism as a strategy of controlling the occupation within which colleagues, equal to each other, establish a system of self-management, and they see it as a mean of simultaneously raising the reputation of both the individual and the profession itself. Similarly to the previous two approaches, the strategy of controlling the profession here also refers to the control over the entrance to the profession through the control of education, training and acquired qualifications, but also through the formal and informal management of its members' behaviour [17; p.83]. Finally, authors thus introduce the concept of professionalism which they define as the mobility, that is, the establishment of exclusivity and closure of an occupation, i.e. a profession.

From Parry and Parry's interpretation it is evident that, contrary to the taxonomic approach, theories of the social conflict perspective in sociology of professions omit the role of knowledge and expertise, although both can be used in the legitimisation of the status of prestige of a particular profession. Unlike interactionist theories, on the other hand, conflict ones concentrate much more on the protected position of professions in the market [12]. Since the focus of power approach analysis has moved away from the concept of profession, as a specific and generic category of occupation, but also from the professionalization, as a process that seeks to establish and maintain the closure of a certain occupation, it can be said that it has shifted to the concept of **professionalism**, representing the instrument applicable on a wide range of occupations that implies occupation's change and the establishment of social control at the macro, meso and micro levels, and is [4].

Despite the fact that the conflict perspective proved itself to be very useful in the context of understanding the relation of profession and power, it however, unlike the previous phases, did not produce new norms of profession, professionalization or professionalism, that is, it did not further develop the so-called ideal type of the profession nor the criteria occupations should possess in order to be defined as such. In a way this produced a gap in the theoretical basis, considering that the occupations that are called professions are still present, but the discipline of sociology of professions does not define them as different from other occupations [1]. That non-discrimination between professions and "basic" occupations is the exact reason for the emergence of a contemporary discussion on the need of existence of the sociology of professions as a separate discipline and its annexation to the related sociology of occupations or the sociology of work.

It is exactly this discussion and the related surge of micro studies of specific professions, both inside and outside the sociology, that mark the “ugly” part of the study of professions, since it is precisely these two issues which represent insurmountable difficulties in the development of the sociology of professions to this day.

THE UGLY: THE DEATH OF THE RESEARCH AREA OR THE RE-EVALUATION PERIOD

The discussion on the need of existence of the sociology of professions actually begins with the very emergence of a conflicting perspective, which interrupts the so-called “golden age” of both professions and professionalization and the sociological study of these concepts [18]. This “golden age” spanned over the periods of the strongest influence of functionalist and interactional approach and the largest production of works in the field of sociology of the profession in the middle of the 20th century. Its end can be marked in the 1970s and 1980s when the professions themselves entered a period of dramatic changes, with the most significant one concerning the transfer of professional activity from private practices and smaller partners to large organizations, and consequently the imposing of external control over professional work [18; p.280]. Other changes are related to the growing transnational character of professional work and its demographic transformation resulting from the inclusion of previously excluded groups such as youth, women, and racial minorities [18; p.280]. Finally, previously banned advertising, client solicitation, and competitive bidding among representatives of the same professions were permitted [18; p.280] and professionals became part of the open market where new occupations that offer services based on expert knowledge, but without the autonomy and social reputation characteristic for professions, were also emerging.

Although the sociologists’ interest for these changed characteristics of the profession grew, as was already mentioned in the description of the conflict perspective, they were not able to go beyond the research framework of the “golden age”. Thus, their main response to these changes was setting the thesis of “deprofessionalization”¹ and questioning whether “true” and traditional professions, as they lose control of their knowledge and activities, are professions at all [18; p.280]. Following this, many sociologists have, by the 1990s, “concluded that existing theoretical frameworks had become implausible” and that the research of professions in some way “fell out of fashion”, which in some way extinguished sociology of professions as a separate discipline [18; p.281]. Due to this conceptual and theoretical death of professions, it has frequently been said that sociologists move away from researching professional power and prestige and focus more on the institutional aspect of experts’ work in the form of studying the organizations they work in, trends in their deprofessionalization, and their changing careers. In doing so, the broad theoretical frameworks characteristic of earlier phases, were being abandoned [18; p.290].

Other authors, such as Evetts [3] or Sciulli [14], however saw the 1990s as a kind of turning point. This period after 1990, characterized by a re-examination of professionalism and its positive and negative consequences for clients and professionals, but also for social systems in general, was called a period of re-evaluation [3]. As this period implies a growing transformation of the phenomenon of profession, it is not uncommon for it to be marked as a new professionalism, post-professionalism, post-modern professionalism, etc. [2], as it is also not uncommon for it to be understood as a period that, in some way, returns to the normative understanding of professionalism like the functionalist approach [3].

The thesis of the survival of the sociology of professions as a discipline can be somewhat supported by a basic search of the Scopus database, according to which the number of papers whose title or abstract mention “profession” or that word is one of the keywords has, in the

new millennium, jumped significantly compared to the 1990s. The average number of such papers in 1990s ranged between 1,500 and 2,000 per year, while, for example, between 2000 and 2010 it varied from 2,500 to even 5,000 papers per year, and between 2010 and 2020 from 5,000 to 8,000 papers [7]. The same topic search in the Web of Science database also shows an increase in the number of papers in this field, where the average number of papers in the 1990s was 1,200 to 1,800, from 2000s to 2010s it ranged between 2,000 and 4,500 and from 2010 onwards between 5,000 and almost 9,000 [8]. The review of the Sociological Abstract and SocIndex databases also indicates similar growth [13]. Of course, this kind of growth cannot be attributed only to the growth of scientific contributions to the sociology of professions and other disciplines' research on professions, but part of it must be ascribed to the development of science in general, globalization, and an increasing number of scientific journals and their digitization.

However, this increase in numbers and the growing literature it represents indicates that the research of professions is not a "dead end", as some authors have suggested, and that, despite the many problems this area has encountered, authors persist in its empirical and theoretical development. Apart from that, the interest in questions that sociologists of previous phases sought the answer to, such as the development of a profession, its organization, its relationship with the state, and its role and power in society, has also been renewed [13].

The main issues that the articles of the last 20 years have addressed include gender, ethnic and social inequalities in accessing the professional praxis and the rewards it implies; the process of professionalization and the formation of professional groups; challenges faced by the dominant professions, such as the deprofessionalization and the loss of autonomy; professional regulation, the impact of political changes on professions and the relationship of professions with the state; and the characteristics of professionals, their work experience, and their job satisfaction. Less represented topics covered in recent papers are professional work in organizations or the application of organizational theory to its research; relations between different professions, their jurisdiction and mutual conflicts; the professionalism, professional ethics and the public trust professionals enjoy; and finally the professional knowledge and expertise [13; pp.155-156].

It is important to note that these studies build on the numerous theories and prominent authors of previous stages of development of sociology of professions. In that way many authors see the Weberian approach as the one that most enables an objective research of the important relations between professions and the state [13], and social processes through which professions acquire and maintain status and privileges, but also variations of such processes and their outcomes in different socio-historical contexts [13]. Weber's approach, or to be more precise, his typology of organizational structure, were the starting point for theories that pointed to the particularities of professions within organizations and the need for inclusion of the organizational analysis in the sociology of professions [13]. Although to a lesser extent, contemporary research, in addition to Weberian, follow the traces of functionalist and interactionist approaches as well. Sciulli's work from 2009 in such a way refers to Talcott Parsons, while for example those of Collins, Dewing and Russell from 2009, Currie, Finn and Martin from 2009 and Schinkel and Noordegraaf from 2011 show great interest in Abbott's work [13].

EVER UGLIER OR THE WAY FORWARD: MICRO STUDIES OF THE SPECIFIC PROFESSIONS

By the aforementioned simple search of the term "profession" in the Scopus and Web of Science citation databases, in addition to the general growth of research on professions, it is possible to get an insight of the spheres in which this development takes place, i.e. identify which disciplines, apart from sociology, study professions and in what manner. Interestingly,

even a superficial overview of scientific fields and the related articles' keywords shows that the research of professions is mainly focused on the study of individual professions, and often crosses the boundaries of sociology and social sciences in general. By far the majority of that kind of research can be found in the field of medicine and nursing, followed by the education and librarianship, social work and law, and engineering, in that order. In a lesser extent studies on professions are present in the fields of economics and management, psychology, biochemistry, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, dentistry, and communication. Even when limiting the search results to the social sciences or sociology, the largest number of research remains related to the aforementioned occupations and/or professions [7-8].

Linking the mentioned number of articles in certain disciplines and the previously presented research streams in the sociology of professions shows that both sociology and other disciplines are, even in the period of the last ten years, to a large extent still preoccupied with exploring specific profession (or occupations seeking to become one) and their traits, as it was the case in the 1950s and 1960s. Likewise, the most frequently analysed professions remain the same as they were in the very beginnings of the development of the sociology of professions, differing according to their degree of professionalization, but also their social status, reputation, and income. Thus, the most commonly researched professions still remain the traditional or classic ones (e.g. doctors and lawyers) that enjoy a high reputation because of their distinguishability, then newer professions as the product of industrialization and organizational needs (e.g. engineers) that enjoy a high reputation because of the social need for their expertise, and finally semi-professions (e.g. nurses, social workers, teachers, librarians) that continue to struggle for the social recognition and the market sphere for their activity and consequently for higher status, reputation, and income than they currently possess [9].

Earlier theoretical and empirical contributions to the sociology of professions were focused either on researching the archetypal professions of medicine and law or on assessing how close are other specific occupations, such as teachers, social workers or nurses, in meeting the criteria of these professional ideal types [5-6]. This was done either in an earlier context of studying different social functions of professions, their specific education, and various responsibilities, or in a later context of concentrating on their gaining of monopoly and social power. After a, what seemed to be, short period of turmoil in the discipline, modern contributions are also turning back to dealing with the same occupational groups, such as those in the health care (doctors and nurses), but also law and social work, education, engineering, architecture, journalism and accounting [13]. Apart from that, the mentioned groups are more frequently becoming the carriers of the research on the professionalization of their occupations, often completely bypassing sociological theoretical origins and its conceptual problems and gaps.

The latter indicates that the research of professions, professionalization, and professionalism, although arising from sociology, did not remain in it, but became characteristic of disciplines that seek to maintain or establish the status of professions. On the other hand, the research remaining within the sociology of professions have in fact become micro studies of individual professions.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the introduction, the main goal of this article was to sketch out and summarise the history of research in the sociology of professions, while providing readers with an overview of the basic shifts in the definitions of profession and explanations of its distinction from occupation. By focusing on the three major sociological approaches in studying professions (functionalist, interactionist and social conflict) and by providing the approximate periods of their prevalence, the goal of the article was not to oversimplify the presentation of the sociology of professions as a research field. The intention was simply to systematically reflect on the

dominant theoretical basis in specific periods. That being said, the presented main research streams in sociology of professions, although the most prominent and referenced ones, especially in the mentioned time periods, are certainly not the only approaches to the subject nor are they so perfectly and ideal-typically linear and exclusive as it might seem to be. This also means that in the period of one theoretical stream's dominance, there were, however, authors who studied professions, professionalization, or professionalism from another perspective. Likewise, authors' work does not have to necessarily belong to only one of the mentioned approaches, but can instead, as it often does, encompass elements of multiple research streams.

Apart from providing an insight into the previous and current scientific development in sociology of professions, the article also reflected on the thesis of the "death" of this very specific discipline with an indisputably great interdisciplinary potential, but also with a lot of long-lasting internal and external issues.

In the effort to provide a definition of the profession and explain its development path, this discipline in some way also offers instructions for occupations to transform themselves into a profession. Thus, it can be said that sociology of professions is a field of research which directly or indirectly affects the very subject of its study [1].

In addition, most of the research in this discipline, both the traditional ones that developed it in a first place and the contemporary ones, include case studies of a single specific profession in a distinctive social, political, and economic context. This certainly did not contribute to the resolution of the conceptual problems this discipline had from its start and, together with the growing number of occupations reaching for the status of professions and the difficulties of distinguishing profession as specific form of occupation in general, gradually led to a kind of stagnation of the discipline itself.

The lack of a unique definition of professions and their distinctiveness compared to occupation, the large representation of micro studies of specific professions and other limitations of available theoretical frameworks and previous research certainly make it difficult to theoretically and conceptually elaborate future work in the discipline of sociology of professions and beyond.

REMARK

¹Deprofessionalisation can be simply defined as the "loss of elements that constitute classical professions, such as a monopoly over expert knowledge, working autonomy and authority, social exclusiveness, privileged status, value system and ethical behaviour, etc." [6; p.11].

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