

Essay Review

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FROM PROFESSOR TO ‘KNOWLEDGE WORKER’:
PROFILES OF THE ACADEMIC PROFESSION

Anthony Welch (ed.), *The Professoriate: Profile of a Profession*, Higher Education Dynamics Vol. 7. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005). 230 pp., ISBN 1-4020-3382-6

Robert Clark and Jennifer Ma (eds.), *Recruitment, Retention and Retirement in Higher Education: Building and Managing the Faculty of the Future* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2005) 320 pp., ISBN 1-84542-185-X

DECLINE OR RENEWAL?

Two contrasting narratives shape these books: the decline and fall of the professoriate, and a more hopeful story of the assimilation of academics into the leading ranks of ‘knowledge workers’. Although both narratives flow through both books, the first narrative is more prominent in the first book, which focuses more narrowly on the professoriate; while the second narrative is more prominent in the second book, which addresses the wider academic profession.

Terminology, of course, is important here. The ‘professoriate’ emphasizes the status of those who hold that title – a category closely linked perhaps to another more antique category, the ‘dons’. It may also insinuate the intellectual independence, even the social detachment, of senior academics. The ‘faculty’, on the other hand, has a different ring. (It is not simply an American translation of ‘professoriate’ – even if, paradoxically, American universities use the title of ‘professor’ much more promiscuously than in Europe).

It suggests a more open category, focused on higher education ('faculty' need students in ways that 'professors' do not), and more committed to social engagement than academic detachment. So the 'professoriate', sensitive to the erosion of its social standing, may be more inclined to the narrative of decline-and-fall; while 'faculty' may identify more with 'knowledge workers' and engaged intellectuals.

The story of declining status is well established. The massification of higher education has been accompanied by the degradation of the academic profession. Just as élite universities have been swallowed up in mass higher education, as well as post-secondary or tertiary education; so a proud professoriate has been swallowed up in a burgeoning academic proletariat. This view of the condition of the academic profession is one that commands substantial support – possibly in wider society but certainly within the profession itself. 'Decline and fall' is always a powerfully hubristic motif, the fear and thrill that the best days are past. Accounts of the academic profession, both popular and academic, certainly pander to these feelings.

The title of A.H. Halsey's book *Decline of Donnish Dominion* said it all.¹ Today the dons, the professors, suffer from lower social esteem (and lower salaries). Their autonomy has been curtailed by the new assessment and accountability systems that have flourished in the so-called 'audit society' (and also by the quasi-market imperatives generated by the 'knowledge society'). Their work has been (over?) regulated. Their scientific and cultural capital has been exploited, even plundered. And senior professors are victims as much as, or even more than, junior academics – 'commodified, virtualised, globalised and postmodernised' in the words of the editor of the first of these two books (p. 214).

The optimistic narrative locates the transformation of the academic profession, the faculty, within a larger phenomenon: the emergence of a new class of 'knowledge workers'. They are the products of four decades of mass higher education; and they embody the 'graduate culture', which has now become a key determinant of a bourgeois lifestyle (and, more broadly perhaps, a key entitlement in a democratic society). Their dominance is such that they tend to overshadow older and more traditional elites and to marginalize other social groups, both the Weberian salariat and the

¹ A.H. Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion: The British Academic Professions in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

Marxist proletariat. The academic profession, especially its younger elements, is a key component of this new class of 'knowledge workers', both in terms of its role in the (initial and continuing) formation of the wider class, and as its leadership. Within a knowledge-based economy and a knowledge-suffused society, teachers and researchers in universities and similar organizations are not only primary producers, but also serve as a form of secular priesthood.

Both narratives are powerful and pervasive – but in different ways. The 'knowledge worker' is typically found in wider social analyses and cultural speculations. He seems anaemic, abstract, a description of an unrecognisable 'other'. By contrast, the declining professoriate features prominently in more detailed (and more narrowly focused) studies of the academic profession – for example, the extensive literature on the impact of 'managerialism' on higher education. This story is immediate and intimate, because we, the professors, are writing about ourselves; and personal biography, with its nostalgia for 'golden time', impinges on scholarly analysis.

Before these two narratives diverged, professors inhabited one grand, rather Whiggish, story. In the third quarter of the twentieth century, it seemed likely that the traditional 'professoriate' would evolve, painlessly and without loss, into the wider 'faculty'. Harold Perkin's history of the Association of University Teachers was published during this time. Its title, like Halsey's, said it all – *Key Profession*.² The ruling assumption was that professors could continue to enjoy their 'donnish dominion', but also unlock the knowledge society.

Today it is difficult to be so optimistic. First, professors are less well paid – on average. They appear to have lost ground compared to their preferred peer groups – senior civil servants and the traditional professions, such as medicine and law. (This may be because these groups have been particularly successful in maintaining their income levels; and, in the case of medicine, there is a substantial overlap between the practising and academic professions). But the reasons for this economic decline are complex. A significant factor is the marketization of academic salaries, with some professors (typically in business and the more cutting-edge technologies) being paid much more than others (typically in the humanities, more theoretical social sciences, and the natural sciences). Another – alleged

² Harold Perkin, *Key Profession: The History of the Association of University Teachers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1999).

– factor has been the feminisation of the academic profession. Some argue that greater equality of opportunity for women to become academics may have depressed salaries, as happened previously with secondary school teachers.

A third factor has certainly been massification: because higher education has expanded (and with it, the research system), the academic profession has become a mass profession. The impact on research has been greater than on teaching. University teachers may be paid less, and have to cope with greater numbers of students; they may even have lost esteem; but their conditions have changed much less than is commonly imagined. Despite the pressures of audit and accountability, and the (occasional) intrusion of ‘managerialism’, they still manage their own time and operate as relatively free-standing professionals. The ‘teams’ in which they work have many of the characteristics of voluntary associations, governed by peer and collegial norms, rather than compulsory groupings, dictated by managerial practices. In a sense, university teaching has remained a rather old-fashioned business.

Not so research (outside the traditional humanities), which has become a quasi-industrial enterprise. It has hierarchical line-management, an unforgiving performance culture, and a burgeoning ‘under-class’ of contract workers. This contrast between teaching and research gainsays the suggestion, made in the first of these books, that the erosion of the academic profession has been most pronounced on the periphery of higher education, in new kinds of institution, and least pronounced at its core (for example, the Russell Group of sixteen research-intensive universities in the UK). It may be true that at the outer periphery, in some for-profit institutions, professional norms count for very little. But it is in the most research-intensive universities that the transformation of the professional culture has been greatest – if the whole faculty, including contract research workers, is included, and not just the comparatively privileged professoriate.³

In addition to economic decline, professors appear to have lost social standing. As Alvin Gouldner feared, the role of the professor as a humanist has diminished – or has it? The appetite of the mass media and political system for ‘experts’ of all kinds, the great majority of whom come from higher education, seems to be insatiable. Admittedly, today’s ‘experts’ are treated with less respect

³ The professoriate, by espousing the rhetoric – and the competitiveness – of ‘world-class research’ has been the main agent of this transformation.

than yesterday's. But this is probably linked to a much more fundamental decline in respect for, and deference to, authority in most contemporary societies, which has been especially sharp in Britain since the Thatcher era. The expansion of higher education, which has produced mass graduate populations, has been a major agent of this change – as have changing conceptions of research practice (and, more fundamentally, of knowledge traditions and cognitive values). So the actions of the professoriate have contributed to its own 'decline'.

Today's 'experts' must jostle for attention – and with each other, which may appear undignified to some. But what else is to be expected in a society that has fetishized 'market' competition and the cult of the 'celebrity'? The 'public intellectual' is alive and well – and, more than ever, drawn from the ranks of the professoriate/faculty – whether as a political adviser, technical expert, cultural commentator, even performer in his own right. (The professorial presenters of TV programmes have themselves become celebrities.)

PROSPECTS FOR THE PROFESSORIATE

These two books offer contrasting perspectives on the future of the academic profession. The first, as its title indicates, focuses more on the professoriate than on the wider profession. As a result, the 'decline' narrative is prominent. Although the book contains several technical surveys of the state of the academic profession (in the USA, Latin America, China, and Hong Kong), its tone overall, its tone is regretful, even resentful. The heavy hand of 'managerialism' seems to be felt almost everywhere. Yet, the chapter by Peter Geurts and Peter Maassen demonstrates just how deeply academics continue to be involved in the governance of their own institutions, at any rate in Europe. Their involvement suggests, again, that the professors are as much the perpetrators of 'managerialism' as its victims.

The picture of decline-and-fall is qualified in other ways – reluctantly, as if some of the authors are torn between their own impressions of decline, and the empirical research they report, which suggest a more complex picture. For example, although average academic salaries have declined compared to traditional comparators, there are several exceptions – notably in Business Schools. Yet, research assessment and university rankings have improved the market position of all professors who can plausibly

claim to have ‘star’ quality. Which is the more significant phenomenon – the overall settling of academic salaries, or their much wider distribution by discipline, institution, and country?

There are other examples of dissonance between the decline-and-fall narrative (the ‘heart’ of this book), and research evidence (its ‘head’). Craig McInnis and Malcolm Anderson, in what is otherwise a telling exposé of the impact of institutional reform on the job satisfaction of academics in Australia, find that increased workloads are not strongly correlated with satisfaction levels. This tendency undermines the assumption that massification is a direct cause of the academic profession’s economic and cultural decline. On a different front, Laurel Bornholt, Millicent Poole, and John Hattie problematize the causal relationship that is sometimes casually assumed between the feminisation of the academic profession and the decline-and-fall narrative. They conclude that gender differences are largely subsumed in, and explained by, status differences within the academic profession.⁴ Finally, McInnis and his colleagues even suggest there may be a hopeful synergy between the creative freedom (still) enjoyed by academics, and new socio-economic agendas that prioritize ‘creative entrepreneurialism’.⁵

This tension between the interpretative thread that runs through *The Professoriate: Profile of a Profession*, and many of the detailed findings presented in its individual chapters, is not to the discredit of the editor or the authors. On the whole, they provokes important questions. The academic profession is fragmenting, with different parts proceeding on different paths and at different speeds; these processes are transforming the nature of the profession – and make generalization difficult. It has altered organizationally, in terms of who is included, how institutions define membership, and the boundaries between the academic profession and other professions. And it has changed normatively, not simply in terms of the erosion of a common intellectual culture (which probably never existed) and shared scientific norms (which probably did – and do?), but also in terms of the wider transformation of ‘knowledge practices’ within a knowledge society. This first book is surprisingly successful in alluding to and hinting at these complexities which, of course, qualify the decline and fall narrative.

⁴ This offers no comfort, of course, to women who constantly knock their heads against glass ceilings, or suffer other forms of discrimination in their academic careers.

⁵ A phenomenon that relates to neo-liberal and market-driven scenarios of social change, which, paradoxically, most people in universities handle with extreme care.

THE RENEWAL OF FACULTY

The focus of the second book is at once broader (the wider 'faculty' rather than simply the professoriate), and more future-oriented (less influenced by nostalgia); but also narrower (the focus is almost entirely on the USA). It is also less analytical. *Recruitment, Retention and Retirement in Higher Education: Building and Managing the Faculty of the Future* is based on a so-called 'Three Rs' conference – and reads like it. The editors, Robert Clark and Jennifer Ma, have not really attempted an introduction or a conclusion. There is no organizing idea, nor an interpretative theme, but a pressing preoccupation – how to renew an ageing academic profession. Interesting questions arise because, as times and situations change, like-for-like substitution becomes impossible. Renewal must amount to more than replication, or reproduction. Here is an altogether different perspective upon the transformation of the academic profession.

The authors identify three key issues: the declining number of (American) PhD students; the creeping casualisation of the academic workforce (perhaps a better description than profession); and the greying of the academic profession (intensified by the imminent retirement of the faculty members recruited during its rapid expansion in the 1960s and 1970s). The decline in PhD students means that the American higher education and research systems are becoming increasingly dependent on importing academic talent from elsewhere, principally the Far East and South Asia. Casualisation reflects the comparative reduction in tenure-track positions in American universities. The shifting age profile is common to the populations of most advanced societies, but also reflects the unbalanced pattern of academic recruitment over past decades.

Dig a bit deeper, and these issues take on a greater significance. While the American university system (like America itself) has always depended on attracting immigrant talent (principally from Europe until the 1960s), far larger flows of international students, and researchers, are characteristic of contemporary higher education systems. As a result, their 'national' character has been compromised, at any rate in research. Although the largest flows are still in scientific and technical subjects, the scale of these increasingly multi-directional global exchanges of talent has exposed all Western higher education systems to different traditions of knowledge.

Some have perceived the influx of alternative epistemologies and methodologies as a threat to the integrity of science. 'Political correctness' is not simply an internal phenomenon, reflecting the social and cultural diversity of mass higher education; it may also be an external phenomenon, reflecting global difference. International flows of students and researchers are part of globalisation, which is reshaping economic structures, cultural identities, and individual lifestyles across the world (as much in hegemonic as – once – peripheral regions).

The casualisation of the academic workforce in the USA (and a similar process can be observed in many other higher education systems) also has global significance. At first sight, this can be explained in terms of the 'usual suspects'. The advance of 'the market' (even into the so-called 'public' sector) has eroded professional privilege; the pressure on university budgets, either because of public funding constraints or consumer resistance to higher tuition fees, has made it difficult to increase the number of tenure-track positions; and the rise of 'managerialism' has encouraged institutional leaders to seek more compliant workforces.

But other factors are at work. One, surely, is the desire on the part of faculty (US-style), or academic staff, to build more flexible careers – which has reflected, and also influenced, the growth of a more 'open' university curriculum. The shift towards vocational disciplines, hybrid and volatile subject combinations, practice-based teaching, and reforms of learning (not just e-learning systems but a re-balancing of the roles of teachers and students) may mean that tenure-track positions are less needed and less valued. Changes in research have also precipitated casualisation. Research has become a professional practice in its own right, and in 'Mode 2', has a more flexible articulation with traditional disciplines. These developments have undermined traditional professional structures such as tenure, but have also spawned new 'professions'.

Strategies for renewal of the greying academic profession can be pragmatic – raise retirement ages, or increase the attractiveness of the academic profession to new entrants (or both). But the problem can also be addressed at rather different levels. One is the subject of this review, the image (and self-image) of the academic profession. The professoriate is naturally reluctant to define itself as a 'brand'. But the cultural status of professors clearly has a major influence on the overall attractiveness of the academic profession. To analyse that status requires more than data collection and/or interview

surveys. Studies of how academics are presented in fictional terms and in the mass media are equally relevant here. *Lucky Jim*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The History Man*, and their latter-day successors, such as *On Beauty*, come to mind.⁶ But the public presence of professors, whether as television pundits and presenters, or through their political interventions, also builds the 'brand'.

Another strategy for academic renewal – or, more accurately, academic sustainability – is to rethink 'retirement'. After all, 'retirement' seems to have been a comparatively recent invention of Weberian bureaucracies, Taylorist managements and welfare-state politicians (and, to be fair, a product of lengthening lifespans). Before the full emergence of industrial and urban societies in the nineteenth century, 'retirement' was almost unknown. Maybe, as new conceptions of life–work balance are developed, and as the boundaries between paid work and other social activity become increasingly permeable, 'retirement' will fade. And where better to start than with one of the knowledge society's most advanced sectors, academic work?

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Each of these books, the first more explicitly than the second, raises important questions about the nature of professional formation in a market-oriented society, about the nature of academic work, and about the role of universities. None of these questions has a simple or straightforward answer. Professions are doubly relevant to the professoriate – it leads one, and it educates the others. A consequence of massification has been to place even greater emphasis on professional formation, because the development of mass higher education systems has been closely aligned with the emergence of new professions such as HR (human relations) or the upgrading of existing professions such as nursing. But many of them, having been established by external agencies (whether by state regulation or to satisfy 'consumer' expectations), lack an independent social or cultural base. Universities, of course, have played a key role in defining as well as constructing them. But, in the process, the academic profession may itself have been redefined.

If so, the academic profession must be reconstituted. In fact there is ample evidence that this is happening in many different

⁶ Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (Camberwell, Vic: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).

ways in the context of teaching – for example, the shift from teaching to learning; the emergence of a more ‘open’ university curriculum; more flexible patterns of delivery (distance learning, work-based learning, and so on). Research has undergone even more significant changes. Funding has concentrated in the most research-intensive universities. The supposedly organic links between research and university-level teaching, and with wider intellectual culture and popular science, have weakened. Also, research has shifted from ‘Mode 1’ (discipline-bound and curiosity driven) to ‘Mode 2’ (problem-oriented and project-focused). Yet, the depth to which these apparently fundamental changes in the nature of academic work have penetrated remains unclear. The more ‘open’ university curriculum may still ultimately depend on what is happening in the ‘closed’ world of disciplines still self-defining in terms of academic affinities, while the synergies between ‘Mode 2’ knowledge production and ‘Mode 1’ research remain powerful. Perhaps it is a case of *le plus ça change, le plus c’est la même chose*. If this is so, the need to review the academic profession may not be driven so remorselessly by epistemological imperatives.

Most important, what of the role of the university in the knowledge society? Higher education is the *habitus* of the academic profession; the university is the professoriate’s home as well as its context. Once again, there is ample evidence that universities are being institutionally transformed, a more significant phenomenon than the restructuring of higher education systems, which sometimes seem to receive more (critical?) attention. Typically, emphasis is placed on efforts to strengthen organizational structures within universities – in which ‘managerialism’ has its (dis) honoured place. But at least as much emphasis needs to be placed on the normative (and, sometimes, organizational) disintegration of the university – to which ‘managerialism’, and its attendant evils, are merely a (probably unavailing) response. The modern university has become a hybrid institution, with multiple and sometimes incommensurable missions. This is entirely consistent with the growth of a knowledge-suffused society, in which dedicated ‘knowledge’ institutions, such as universities, must have increasingly porous boundaries.

This review began by drawing a contrast between two narratives about the future of the professoriate/faculty – on the one hand, decline-and-fall; and on the other, the knowledge worker. Neither is really able to capture the complexities and ambiguities that face the academic profession – but both contain important elements of

truth. It is true that the traditional professoriate does appear at times to be on the defensive, looking back with nostalgia (and, maybe, a little anger) to a 'golden time' when its economic and cultural status seemed secure. It is also true that the emergence of a knowledge society, with classes of 'knowledge workers', is the inescapable framework within which the future of the academic profession will be moulded.

The two narratives, of course, intersect. One reason for the defensive posture of the professoriate is that the knowledge society is unfamiliar (and possibly uncongenial). One imperative created by the emergence of a twentieth-century knowledge society is that the academic profession abandon some of its twentieth-century baggage, never an easy task. But the tension between these two narratives should not be exaggerated. T.S. Eliot wrote mystically in 'Little Gidding' in *The Four Quartets* of 'ends' and 'beginnings' – but, more prosaically, there is no reason to doubt the ability of the next generation of academics, tomorrow's professoriate, to navigate between, and integrate, what appear to their elders to be incompatible agendas and clashing values. It has been done before – many times.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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