

“Proletarianizing” Lives: Researching Careers

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One definition of the “proletarianization of the professional” is that the professional loses “control over policy and value objectives” in his or her work (Derber 1982b:17). Proletarianization is normally explained as resulting from workplace labor process control (*ibid.*, p. 31). A compatible, but quite different, explanation relates proletarianization to changes in the social practices and ideological orientations of professional careers. In this research note, I present this different explanation and suggest avenues for empirical research.

Changing labor process control subjects professionals not to the “traditional forms of industrial regimentation and constraint” but to a system of control that allows for “relative worker autonomy” (*ibid.*, p. 31). In short, professionals are becoming like Burawoy’s piece-rate workers, who exercise power and discretion (Burawoy 1979:94), but do so in a process “which defines both the conditions of choice and the limits of [their] managerial discretion” (*ibid.*, p. 199).

These changes are said to result from changing employment patterns, evidenced by declining rates of self-employment among professionals and growing rates of employment in heteronomous organizations (Derber 1982a:3; Oppenheimer 1973). The difficulty with this explanation is that professionals have always been sellers of labor power; Cravath never gave it away for free. As Freidson famously showed, “employment, not self-employment, is the characteristic position of professionals” (Freidson 1986:xii; chap. 6). As he emphasized, professionals never worked as they please (*ibid.*, p. 144). Furthermore, in many situations, clients have greater claims to control than professional practices have

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institutionalized (Rosenthal 1974; Sarat & Felstiner 1995). Changing labor process controls may bridge this gap, without resulting in deprofessionalization, let alone proletarianization.

Changing employment patterns, however, also have important effects on the life chances of professionals. Along with changing social and cultural norms, employment opportunities may be rearranging the structure and aspirations of professional careers (cf. Calhoun 1965). Changing careers may help explain how professionals exercise or do not exercise "control over policy and value objectives" (Derber 1982b:17) in their work.

Consider two associates, one at a large corporate law firm and one at an office of a bureaucratized mass-market seller of legal services. Both work long hours, do not select the clients they serve, have little control over what they work on, must have their work approved by a hierarchy of colleagues, and often fill in the blanks in documents largely produced by others. Both can be described as cogs in a large division of labor, within both the firm and society. Although their compensation and status differ, neither earns under the poverty level. They both work at firms organized by the "commercialization of the legal profession."

Both associates are subject to labor process control. Both are hard-working professionals. Yet there is a significant difference, is there not? One difference is in their careers. The corporate law firm associate can dream of a career that leads to a professional ideal, symbolized by an understanding of "partnership." Promotion for the other, if possible, is only into management ranks, not to a different relation of control over legal work. For this reason, this associate might be described as deprofessionalized.

Under changed market and cultural conditions, lawyers may be losing their ability to have careers of certain kinds, which is not only or primarily related to heteronomous employment. At private law firms there are different tiers of associates and partners. Consider lawyers who work at a private law firm on a renewable yearly contract, with no expectation of advancement in the firm. If they stay with this position, they will never progress through the sequence of stages by which one matures within the profession. Their professional judgment, not to mention client involvement, will never develop. Similarly, large-firm partners are finding their careers being rearranged by changes in their work (Kronman 1993:283–91), in part resulting from competition from other professionals (Flood 1995).

Research on careers can take many forms. To link it to the proletarianization thesis requires more than showing that professionals differ from proletarians because they carry "careers"; it requires showing that for professionals the loss of certain kinds

of careers can be “alienating.”¹ To this end, consider the kinds of careers that have been described as “callings” or “vocations.”

To some, as Harold Wilensky said, a “career, viewed structurally, is a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered, predictable sequence” (Larson 1977:70). A career creates a “hierarchical ladder” (Galper 1975:149). So, the only question about careers, both for the individual and the researcher, is how one gains higher rungs up the ladder (Hall 1948, 1949; Cain 1994:27). Empirical research on legal careers has adopted this view, describing mobility into and on career ladders (Maru 1986:45–51).

Admittedly, for many lawyers, their career is their specialty, racket, or game. To them, a legal career “is the making of a livelihood, a competence, a fortune. Law offers means to live, to get ahead” (Llewellyn [1930] 1978:199). Such men and women live *off* law.

Other lawyers, live *for* law. For them, career partakes of vocation. Their livelihood is their lifework (cf. Weber 1958).

During the rise of professionalism, “a professional life [was not conceived] in terms of ascending stages, each preparatory in training for the next, but as a series of good works or public projects” (Bledstein 1976:123; Emmet 1972:246). As recently as 1978, lawyers were taught that “the term ‘career’ . . . tends to reduce vocation, the process by which one seeks to actualize oneself in history . . . to merely a prospective succession of jobs. ‘Career’ creates an illusion of isolation, while in reality a person’s life work is intricately bound to all other lives” (Phelps 1978:100).

To those who think of a career as a ladder, how strange would be Dean Ames’s advice to Felix Frankfurter about the choice between two jobs: “As to what to do, follow the dominant impulses of your career” (Frankfurter 1965:160–61). Frankfurter knew to what Dean Ames was referring: “what Socrates called the inner voice” (ibid., p. 161). Frankfurter reproduced this understanding of career in denigrating as unprofessional the desire of many lawyers to become important government officials or judges (ibid., p. 152). He lauded those lawyers who, fulfilled by lawyering, turned down Supreme Court appointments. They were praiseworthy professionals: They had careers, not career ladders.

In this vision, “character and career were the two faces of a single phenomenon” (Bledstein 1976:112). To be a professional was to profess. Careers were moral subjects; they “give human lives some distinctive, peculiar, even arbitrary human shape and pattern. They humanize . . . experience, and lend them a distinguishing sense and direction, one among many possible ones. It

¹ “Alienation” is notoriously ill-defined. Yet to speak of a proletariat is to assume that it can be defined. I use the term as a predicate for social change.

is natural for men to expect these artificialities, without which their lives would seem to them inhuman" (Hampshire 1978:16).

So understood, careers sustain meaning. Careers counteract what the young Karl Marx understood as alienating labor. Without a career, in Marx's language, work is "external to the worker, . . . not part of his nature; and that, consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work" (Avineri 1968:106).

Such an understanding of career differs from the extant proletarianization thesis in that it locates acceptance of constraint and lack of control as basic to professionalism. A career requires an individual's acknowledgement "not only of his ability but of his limitations" (Goldman 1988:143). Thereby, "a person became aware of the boundaries [so that] one recognized the restrictions of an individual life . . . the potential for fate within freedom" (Bledstein 1976:54–55). One with a vocation is "obliged by his work, rather than being master of the work or being obliged simply by the need to earn a living" (Goldman 1988:22).

This difference can be illustrated by considering professionals losing control over their time, with speedups becoming a norm. One might argue that this system of labor process control deprofessionalizes. To do so, however, is to forget that the concept of career reconciles a professional, according to Max Weber, to "the endlessly more intensive rate of work . . . demanded . . . and that is incompatible with a comfortable enjoyment of life" (Goldman 1988:29). A career will include "spurts of intensity [that] are not intensification; rather, they signal the persistence of task-oriented work rhythms" (Larson 1980:166). Professionals "exploit themselves from devotion to their vocation" (Emmet 1972:255).

Career can legitimate loss of time control, an example of how "the ideology of profession counteracts the structural contradictions of educated labor" (Larson 1977:255). The consequences of loss of time control are mediated by the availability of career to justify this fate. It would indeed be a "cruel irony" if it were demonstrated that "the very process of commercialization that has . . . placed the internal goods of craftsmanship in doubt has also led to a significant increase in the time and energy . . . work demands" (Kronman 1993:301).

Researching Careers

Meaning can be found in work in various ways. The concept of a career is capacious enough to symbolize many different relations between identity and work (Goldman 1988:chap. 4). Shifts in how careers crystallize vocation may be desirable. The Protestant Ethic, for example, demanded "aloneness, an inclination to ascetic labor, devoted service to a god, self-denial and systematic

self-control, a capacity to resist their own desires as well as the desires, pressures, or temptations of others" (*ibid.*, p. 19). The structure and aspirations of careers may change without alienation resulting. We need to understand careers and their carriers better.

Research may focus on those who live off law, telling the story of the alienated. Yet it is not difficult to understand the perversions of a vocation into a career ladder. In an age of commercialism, the pursuit of getting a better position may triumph. In an age of scientism, knowledge may be objectified. In an age of educational credentialism, individual expression may be blunted. In an era of inequality, illegitimate power over others may be justified. In a competitive market, insecurities may define the self, not callings. That professionals live off their professions does not represent a new development. Even in the nineteenth century, most lawyers sought career ladders, but they were criticized for adopting this orientation (Bloomfield 1976:chap. 5). Nonetheless, research on those who live off law can illuminate the changing social practices and ideological orientations of careers.

To contribute to the proletarianization debate, one might examine changing careers as they interact with "service of the broader interests of capital accumulation" (McKinlay 1982:48). Such research, however, is complicated by the service to capital of careers. As Weber showed, there are many affinities between capitalism and careers that partially realize the values of vocation.

By placing the emphasis on "an internal resource" (Bledstein 1976:4), career provided an alternative to a "class structure" (*ibid.*, p. 21) explanation of attainment. In it, professionals were "architects of their own fortune" (*ibid.*, p. 13), allowing the "ineffectual individual" to be blamed "for his own failure" (*ibid.*, p. 113). Career fueled capitalism's creative destruction by an ideal that the person with a career "agitated against complacency, . . . invented means, [and] . . . multiplied the avenues for wholesome rivalry." Careers also constrain, however, limiting creative destruction,² sometimes by the needs of those employing the professionals (Emmet 1972:263). As Larson puts it, professionalism "makes the use of discretion predictable" (Larson 1977:198). Like other individualisms in capitalism, professionalism contains "an illusion of self-determination" (Avineri 1968:31). The proletarianization debate, in highlighting changing labor process controls, suggests that it was not just an illusion or, if an illusion, it was one with consequences.

² In professional ideology, it is represented that "if only professional . . . criteria were dominant in organizations, bureaucratic pathologies like arbitrariness, rigidity, and so forth, would miraculously yield to creativity, flexibility, involvement, and so on" (Eulau 1973:180). Certainly, from studies of legalization, we would not expect such a result from a dominance of legal professional criteria.

Vocation can be crystallized so that all that may be said is that the professional "acted with the 'coldest prudence'" (Bledstein 1976:27). Ralph Waldo Emerson captured one moment of careers under capitalism, when he described those seeking their vocation as "young men . . . with knives in their brain. . . . It is an age of severance, of dissociation, of freedom, of analysis, of detachment. Every man for himself" (ibid., p. 177).³

Careers have well served the processes of capital accumulation. One cannot presume that changing career patterns is functional in that service. Rather than breaking a structure resistant to capitalist shaping, changing careers reshapes the structure. The value of changing career patterns to the service of capital accumulation needs to be demonstrated.

To contribute to the proletarianization debate, one might attempt to capture how changing career patterns may be alienating. One might study how changing careers relates to whether and how professionals seek "control over policy and value objectives" (Derber 1982b:17). To contribute to such a research agenda, the following incomplete list of topics is offered.

1. *The career of the career: passages and disjunctions.* Because vocation links career and character, one measure of whether lawyers have careers is whether they are "judged by their entire performance rather than by any isolated skill" (Bledstein 1976:37). How are lawyers evaluated? Do they sit on a slippery ladder? One false step and one falls all the way down? What do we know about how professionals over the course of their careers, at different points, distance themselves from their roles and internalize the structured ambivalences of the professional role?
2. *The career of caring.* "The 'vocational' side of any kind of work will be found in the extent with which it is concerned with personal relationships and with ministering to human needs" (Emmet 1972:249). Do lawyers minister? Service increases a lawyer's folk knowledge. Is expertise separated from service, technical knowledge from folk knowledge? How do the relations between lawyers and clients affect the structure of professional lives? Extent professionalization studies have focused on "the fragmentation of care for the client" (Haug 1973:197). Fragmentation of caring from the life of the professional also can be studied (Sarat 1998).

³ Without considering historical evidence, Sullivan asserts that it is the modern absence of vocation that creates such individuals: "In the absence of social confidence in the value of the work done, ambition must become paranoid and even self-destructive. Without shared confidence in the value of the task, there can be no secure recognition for individual achievement leaving individuals endlessly anxious, having to validate their self-worth through comparative ranking along an infinite scale of wealth and power" (Sullivan 1997:135–36).

3. *The career of judgment.* In a vocation, an individual grows to “ensure the highest degree of skill. . . . To play the game up to its highest point of excellence” (Bledstein 1976:82). “This is the ‘enthusiasm’ which every one, from a shoemaker to a sculptor, must have, in order to follow his ‘calling’ properly” (Emmet 1972:260 n. 2). Over a career, professionals mature. What is a mature career? Greater expertise through specialization is only part of the answer and a part that does not necessarily increase judgment (Yarmolinsky 1978:164–65, 172–73). We need inquiry into how individuals gain the complex powers by which they are deemed to have “judgment.”
4. *Careers and tradition.* Generally, “the individual, not an institution, is the source of moral judgment; experience, not tradition is the source of understanding” (Bell 1979:22). Careers, however, although they emphasize the individual, do so in the context of institutions and traditions. Professional careers are shaped, for example, by how the profession sustains teacher-researchers producing knowledge, controls access to many managerial positions, and defines continuing education requirements (Freidson 1986:211). How are the professions sustaining these projects? How are they functioning as collegia (Sciulli 1992)? How do they allow individuals to be constrained by craft and craftsmanship, while allowing individual expression (Llewellyn 1960:3–4)?
5. *Careers and community.* Careers shape and pattern, give sense and direction to, individual efforts. As the crystallizations of careers that emphasized a series of good works demonstrate, actualizing oneself in history requires integration between individual efforts and community needs (Shaffer 1991). “In so far as [professional concerns] are communal and not only individual matters, he [the professional] will be having to learn to . . . scrutinize his own purposes and ambitions . . . while at the same time learning to live in charity with other people” (Emmet 1972:265). Such integration requires not “love of public good” (Kronman 1993:54), but links between career patterns and community history. For the careers available, one may ask how such links are forged.
6. *Career and meaning.* To what extent is legal work capable of creating for lawyers a (distorted, but precursive) sense of a realized self? How is work part of the professional’s nature? Does a legal career today create character or only simulacra of character? Is it the case that “most lawyers . . . hope that their work will be a source of satisfaction in itself” and “it is just that belief . . . which is now altering and whose enfeeblement has caused the crisis in which

the American legal profession is now caught" (*ibid.*, p. 2)?

The Loss of Careers and Social Change

To speak of the proletariat is to speak of social change. Contrasting images of the class trajectory of professions have been on the sociological agenda since at least the early 1950s (Freidson 1986:43). Larson certainly is right: "When a society promises advancement through education but withholds its rewards, cynicism and anger are easy; but what people do with their anger depends on ideological constructions, and, especially, on the possibilities of action that are historically available" (Larson 1980:170).

Larson's review of the evidence suggests that careers have functioned to inhibit social change. Careers, according to Wilensky, "by holding out the prospect of continuous, predictable rewards [reduce] . . . a level of rebellion or withdrawal which would threaten the maintenance of the system" (Larson, 1977:229). Yet Larson does not find that withholding the rewards of career increases rebellion or withdrawal. She concludes that "recent experience suggests that adverse labor markets, far from reducing educated workers in the same occupational and educational category to a 'community of fate,' create different types of career lines, associated to relatively stable patterns of the labor market itself" (Larson 1980:159).⁴ According to Robert Blauner, the "new generation" of professionals "may be satisfied with fairly steady jobs which are largely instrumental and non-involving, because they have not the need for responsibility and self-expression in work" (Larson 1977:234).

Other observers disagree, citing evidence that professionals still demand fulfilling work and are less likely to trade wages for decreased intrinsic enjoyment (Derber 1982b:27). Is it possible that although power and money may be their "class interest," the "radical need" of the professional class, whose absence is alienating, is for careers of certain kinds?⁵

Daniel Calhoun's study of the changing structure and aspirations of lawyer careers in the early nineteenth century found that every lawyer "needed something to rescue his sense of career from encroaching urban and commercial growth" (Calhoun 1965:87). He documents the changing social practices and ideo-

⁴ The individualistic responses of members of the professional class, however, does not distinguish them from traditional members of the proletariat (Burawoy 1979:193).

⁵ For a discussion of radical needs as opposed to class interests, see Burawoy (1979:20) and sources cited therein. The emphasis on radical need, not class interest, as the definer of proletarianization is consistent with Marx's view that the proletariat "does not claim a particular redress because the wrong which is done to it is not a particular wrong but wrong in general" (Avineri 1968: 59).

logical constructions of these lawyers, detailing how they responded to meet their radical needs for certain kinds of careers.

What ideological constructions and possibilities for action that can respond to the rewards withheld by changing careers are available today? Studying careers can help formulate such responses as well as demonstrate their need.

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