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Michael A. Bernstein: A Perilous Progress

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Introduction

Professional Expertise as a Historical Problem

All professions are conspiracies against the laity.
—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW [1906]¹

IN HIS REMARKABLE farewell address to the nation in January 1961, during which he introduced the phrase “military-industrial complex” to the lexicon of American politics, President Dwight Eisenhower spoke also of his fear that, in the future, “public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite.” By this utterance, the president wished to draw attention to the increasingly prominent role and influence of experts in the policy-making activities of government, the undemocratic and antidemocratic implications of that development, and the peculiar array of political and social forces it could and would unleash in a parliamentary democracy. Engagement in the critical assessment of the history of public policy formulation, to which the thirty-fourth president of the United States once invited his fellow citizens, remains a significant and necessary challenge—for citizens and scholars alike—almost a half century later.²

Even so, attempting to understand professional expertise as a historical problem involves being as much concerned with the obverse of Eisenhower’s speculation as with its initial premise. In other words, it is necessary to explore not only the extent to which policy formulation and implementation have been captivated by expertise but also the ways in which disciplinary knowledge and professional influence have themselves been molded by statist agendas. It may be understandable that a sitting president would be leery of indulging in the exploration of a dialectical premise. It is nonetheless precisely in the resonance between professions and the state to which Eisenhower gestured that historians may find much that beckons them toward a reconsideration of political and social developments in this century. By examining American economics and public policy in particular, such a reappraisal of twentieth-century politics, political culture, and economic and social history may quite readily be attempted.

A comprehensive examination of public policy, embedded within any particular historical episode, would obviously benefit from an approach that allowed for the interaction of material interests, economic circumstances, and political agency. Yet, in this strategy, the scholar quickly encounters a quandary. The historical literature on the rise of interventionist economic policy in the twentieth century is quite fragmentary. Understood primarily in terms of the Keynesian revolution in economic thought, the course of the “mixed economy” of the postwar United States, for example, has been discussed in most cases in surprisingly inelaborate terms by both economists and historians alike.

On the one side, economists have often referred to the rise and fall of particular “policy regimes,” as they call them, in their effort to explain some of the most dramatic transformations in modern political economic history—the demise of the gold standard in the interwar era, for example, or the articulation of countercyclical fiscal policy in the post–World War II years. But the precise mechanisms of so-called regime change have been either ignored or explained in ways too wooden to bear up under closer scrutiny. Historians, on the other hand, have tended to leave economic policy aside, either in the hope that economists might fully explain it or on the assumption that changes in policy practice are most usefully understood in terms of the succession of governmental administrations (and of individuals within those bureaucracies) responsible for their execution. Ironically enough, both economists and historians have frequently embraced a rather positivist, even Whiggish, view of the subject: policy is understood to have become more sophisticated and effective over time as the professional knowledge that undergirds it has itself matured.

John Maynard Keynes, arguably the greatest historical figure in the evolution of modern macroeconomic policy, embraced just this sort of perspective. He asserted in his 1936 masterwork, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, that “the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else.” While he welcomed a general readership of his effort to revise deeply ingrained ways of thinking about economic matters, he nonetheless believed the “general public” to be, as he put it, “only eavesdroppers at an attempt . . . to bring to an issue the deep divergences of opinion . . . which have for the time being almost destroyed the practical influence of economic theory.” The success of his effort at reestablishing the usefulness of economic theory in public policy practice would, he believed, allow economic problems to become tractable in the hands of a specialized cadre of experts.³

The wonderful naïveté in that thought of Keynes’s has an especially poignant quality for recent generations who have witnessed the virtual collapse of Keynesianism in modern economic affairs. Yet it also conveys an unalloyed optimism, characteristic of earlier generations of scholars in both the social and the natural sciences, that their work could be utilized for the public good. This sanguinity left aside tremendously complicated questions about the goals, as distinct from the means, of public policy, and most of all it ignored the ways in which involvement in the affairs of state would affect disciplinary knowledge itself; this despite the authority and influence such visibility would allow, at times even require, professionals to wield in public life.

To be sure, Keynes also took for granted the very notion of professional expertise, troubling himself not at all with questions regarding the historical, political, and social foundations of what has become an ever more prominent feature of contemporary policy debate. In what fashion one might understand the origins of professional authority, and to what extent one might regard its manifestations as either the welcome representation of a higher learning or, in more cynical terms,

as the tocsin of a set of “conspiracies against the laity,” have of course never been questions of concern to professionals themselves.

On the one side, those who have celebrated professionalism as the functional expression of intellectual progress have, whether self-consciously or not, embraced the view of one of this century’s most eminent sociologists, who, over four decades ago, noted that the scientific knowledge on which expertise subsists rests upon four central principles: “universalism”—accepting or rejecting truth claims independent of personal or political considerations; “communism”—taking scientific knowledge to be the common property of all; “disinterestedness”—insisting upon neutrality in the evaluation of evidence and arguments; and “organized skepticism”—testing and scrutinizing all analytic claims. On the other, social and cultural historians have tended to assess professionalism in a more critical way, noting that while “[s]cience as a source for professional authority transcend[s] the favoritism of politics, the corruption of personality, and the exclusiveness of partisanship,” its mobilization in the hands of professionals often involves the explicit pursuit of class privilege and antidemocratic authority.⁴

Whatever the relative virtues of a positivist or critical approach to an understanding of professional expertise, clearly both the institutional setting within which scientific authority is both nurtured and judged and the social contexts within which professionals organize and utilize their skills powerfully determine the actual impacts of expert knowledge in a particular time and place. Here, too, of course, a conflict or consensus approach will yield dramatically different conclusions, but it is perhaps the focus on process that a sociohistorical perspective necessitates which in this case rightfully takes center stage. Both the university and the professional society may be assessed as either domains of objectivity and rigor or venues of corruption within which “disinterested and dispassionate” learning is sacrificed to the goal of “‘practical’ efficiency” and “the needs of earning and spending.”⁵ Yet, either way, far too many investigations have rested upon the examination of final results, however construed, rather than a close perusal of the particular paths—political, intellectual, social—by which they were reached.⁶

Decades of debate among historians and sociologists of science, concerning “internalist” and “externalist” notions of the evolution of learning, have served to place the points at issue in any study of professionalism and expert knowledge in sharp relief. Mid-twentieth-century notions of science, fashioned at the hands of mainstream social theorists, emphasized the functionalist attributes of expert practice and of the institutional forms within which it subsisted. Closely identified with the work of Robert Merton and Talcott Parsons, this literature focused on the behavioral norms by which scientists pursued their work. Early in the 1960s, this approach came under powerful attack by Thomas Kuhn. Rather than invoking a set of general rules by which science and scientists pursued progress, Kuhn argued that the community of scientists actually constituted a plurality of groups, each committed to contesting paradigms in particular disciplines. Discriminating among these approaches involved assessing the extent to which particular paradigms were more or less capable of solving particular problems. Transformations

in prevailing wisdom, upheld by a majority of practitioners in a given field, represented themselves as a series of “revolutions” in science itself. For Kuhn and his followers, expert knowledge and communities of expertise were thus revealed to have foundations more in conflict and debate than functional consensus.⁷

Situating scientific controversy within its social and historical contexts has become the preoccupation of scholars ever since Kuhn’s intervention in the literature. During the 1970s, the elaboration of a new understanding of scientific progress focused on the circumstances—social, cultural, and political—that allowed for the rise and fall of competing “belief systems” in a given scholarly community. This new approach, some versions of which examined the rhetorical and analogical strategies used in the creation of scientific belief, others of which more resolutely emphasized the social practices and ideological interests of participants in scholarly debate, served to beckon investigators not simply to adopt novel interpretations of “scientific revolutions” but also to undertake altogether innovative studies of research practice itself. Recognizing particular groups of scientists as “interest groups” competing as much for prestige and influence as over a given set of ideas inspired several scholars, while others looked to ethnographic examinations of “laboratory life” as a means to understand more fully the modern evolution of science itself. Yet another sociological strategy used the insights of “network theory” to explicate the ways in which groups of scientists elicited the support of others by the judicious use of incentives (rhetorical, institutional, and material) offered in exchange. Overall, these more recent techniques in the study of the creation of scientific knowledge privileged the social examination of epistemological conflicts over the textual appreciation of canonical outcomes.⁸

Yet above and beyond the substantive content of expert knowledge, and the complicated processes by which it evolves, scholars have always appreciated the fact that expertise is most often deployed by credentialed elites. Professions and professionalization have thus necessarily commanded the attention of investigators as well. In a classic interwar period study of the history of some two dozen British professions, Alexander Carr-Saunders and Paul Wilson firmly established a functionalist approach to the phenomenon of professionalization. With this positivistic outlook on professional authority and influence, which emphasized the service provided by expertise to society as a whole, an emphasis on the rise of specialized techniques, formal training and licensing practices, and codes of ethics was a logical research protocol. At the same time, the very findings of the functionalist “school” offered both empirical support and conceptual inspiration to the arguments of others who saw, in professionalizing processes in modern life, a self-interested pursuit of monopoly power. Needless to say, drawing attention to the exclusionary nature of professions—and its attendant denigration of amateurs, “cranks,” and “quacks”—emboldened the claims of both those who viewed its impacts as desirable and welcome and those who took a more critical, even condemnatory, stance. As with studies of the sociology and the history of scientific doctrines, research on professions and professionalization tended to yield an array of ambivalent conclusions.⁹

More recent scholars have drawn attention to the system of professions as a whole, and to its complex patterns of both interlocking skills and competing jurisdictional claims to authority. Not surprisingly, this more aggregative assessment of professionalization, one that consciously avoids a focus on the nature and history of one profession at a time, draws inspiration from and affords support to both functionalist and monopolistic notions of professionalism. An integral part of this “systems” approach is its close identification of work practices and skills with professional identity itself. In this regard, the practical impacts and problem-solving capabilities of experts become the essential foundation of any understanding of professional evolution and differentiation. At the same time, the “work” of professionals may also be analyzed in terms of the rhetoric and discursive strategies used to legitimate it; the “power” of an expert vernacular, in this case, “lies not in the language itself, but in the group which authorizes it and invests it with authority.”¹⁰

To the rather sprawling domain of the sociology of science and professionalization, the contributions of historical scholarship seek to bring both empirical precision and a catholic analytical stance. Far from an abdication of responsibility for claiming a particular theory as their own, the unwillingness of historians of professionalization to endorse exclusively a given approach to the phenomenon they study is grounded, in large measure, in their concern to remain faithful to the evidence they survey. In point of fact, most historical examples of professionalization yield narratives consistent with a variety of theories, the applicability of which usually depends on the time frame of the investigation under way. The earliest stages of a profession’s development often conform more to structuralist views than later evolutionary trends that often portray struggles for authority more consistent with conflict assessments. Moreover, to the extent historians focus on the attitudes of experts themselves, an understanding of professional ideology and rhetoric must grapple with the self-deception frequently characteristic of the group as a whole. In short, the inherently broad purchase of historical inquiry militates in favor of a multivalent view of professionalization as a social (and political) process.¹¹

Instinctively oriented toward the documentation of agency and contingency in the past, historians find it only logical to assume that the construction of reason and “objectivity” is itself a socially grounded outcome. “[N]o abstract force pushing inexorably toward greater freedom,” expert knowledge, in both its formal manifestations and its applications, is understood by historians to be “determined by the narrower purposes of men and women; their interests and ideals shape even what counts as knowledge.” It is in this way that the evolution of professional authority has “cast up a new world of power” that captivates the attention of historians and draws them to analyze, as well, “the vast institutions that have arisen to manage and finance the rationalized forms of human labor.” Not only expert knowledge

itself but also the institutional and social frameworks within which it is both cultivated and utilized necessarily capture the historical imagination.¹²

For historians of the American experience, scrutinizing the links between professional authority, expert knowledge, and social and political institutions inevitably gravitates toward a reconsideration of Progressivism, one of the most potent and maddeningly complicated components of the nation's political life since the late nineteenth century. It had been, of course, the Progressives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who had embraced the emergence of bureaucracy and, as they understood it, a meritocratic order—a network of new social relationships premised on educational achievement, professional accomplishment, and adherence to ethical codes of conduct. This “modernized” and increasingly urbanized social setting stood in sharp contrast to the small, isolated, self-sufficient settlements of rural America, the “island communities” of which Robert Wiebe has written so cogently and evocatively in more recent decades. In their determination to widen the arena within which professional expertise might shape public policy and choice, in their powerfully held conviction that “progressivist” doctrines would serve to shatter all distinctions and judgments based on considerations other than those of objective quality and virtuosity, these activists worked to transform a social and political world that had, for well over a century, grounded its decisions in considerations of region, race, class, gender, and national origin.¹³

Yet in the determination to reform their world, the Progressives did not create a new order that was inherently tolerant and inclusive. Theirs was a wholly self-confident vision that reduced every question about the power of large corporations (and of the credentialed elites that served them), every anxiety about the loss of kinship networks and the rise of impersonal market ties, every approving gesture toward the communal values of the preindustrial farm to the frantic demonstrations of a reactionary, paranoid, and sentimental constituency—one quite often identifiable not simply by its aversion to modernity and progress but also by its flirtation with racist and nativist ideologies. What is more, to the inward-looking and often atavistic sentiments of their opponents, the Progressives often counterposed a celebration of ambition and individual (not to mention individualized) achievement. Regulating and stabilizing the terms under which individuals could thus rise within a competitive meritocracy necessarily preoccupied these reformers on the make and turned their attention toward matters of professionalization themselves.¹⁴

Routinization and impartiality in training and advancement, an insistence on objectivity and probity in the pursuit of knowledge, the employment of learning for beneficent ends—these all constituted, in the minds of Progressives, not only universally desirable goals but also the logical outcome of professionalizing strategies. Government “by science, not by people” was a creed, not a contradiction. Whatever antidemocratic tendencies might be inherent in the ideal theory of Progressivism, its practice—exemplified by the highly skilled and honest expert, a knowledgeable and discriminating public, and efficient and judicious bureaucracies—would and could guard against any objectionable eventuality. Just as a mer-

chant class in the seventeenth century had facilitated the demise of feudalism, a modern middle class would, in the twentieth century, remove the last vestiges of unprincipled and thoughtless passion from politics and replace them with the cool reason of logic and tested performance.¹⁵

It is therefore not too much of an exaggeration to claim that the history of Progressivism is indeed the history of the middle class and, in turn, that the history of the middle class, in its American variants, is bound up with the history of professionalization itself. The great mass of the American people, who throughout the twentieth century have identified themselves as either of the middle class or aspiring to be part of that class, have embraced a particular veneration for the authority and influence that credentialed expertise nurtures. Indeed, throughout this century, the enhancement of American authority in the wider world has been closely linked with the utilization of professional skills that have been represented as both the source of and justification for the nation's superiority in world affairs, a hegemony observable along any dimension one wishes to examine—cultural, diplomatic, economic, intellectual, military, and political. This “American century” of power and influence has been, first and foremost, an era of professional accomplishment and perquisites.¹⁶

The significance and importance of a century-long perspective on matters of professional authority in American society should not be overlooked. It may be quite plausible to argue, as many scholars have done, that the emergence of expert knowledge and credentialed elites has, at certain points in history, followed an “internalist” pattern. Even so, the twentieth century has left a record that seriously challenges any resort to such an inward-looking method. Modern state institutions have so powerfully molded every facet of social life that even the seemingly obscure realms of disciplinary knowledge have revealed themselves to be far more complicated historical products than many earlier treatments have allowed. In this regard, the salience of national mobilization and war as motifs within which scientific change may be understood has now become almost universally accepted as an appropriate starting point for contemporary intellectual histories. This is all to say that coupled with any appreciation of the doctrinal evolution of a discipline, tied to any chronicling of the social and political forces wielded by elites in an effort to cultivate their own authority and influence in particular areas of endeavor, there is now a broad recognition of the dramatic role played by collective (and collectivizing) events such as war, natural catastrophes, economic transformations, and political upheavals. For this understanding, the historical models afforded by twentieth-century experience have been especially important for reasons that are as obvious as they are disturbing.¹⁷

To understand the particular evolution of an expert discipline, one must no doubt utilize an array of methodologies and research techniques. In the case of American economics, the field's close connection with matters of public policy and governmental operations makes the historian's task all the more difficult.¹⁸ Separating the mechanisms, internal and external, responsible for the elaboration of a professional economic sensibility as well as for the articulation of an expert community of economists themselves becomes, in this context, a particularly

daunting task. Even so, the objectives of the enterprise, unlike those of philosophers and sociologists who study science, have far less to do with the testing of specific propositions or the evaluation of certain cognitive and analytical models than they have to do with making sense of a complicated and, at times, quite ambivalent historical record. The goal, then, is not to provide grist for the mills of those determined to test specific hypotheses regarding scientific evolution and professionalization. Rather, the end in view is to provide a narrative that both justifies and animates a particular approach to the study of twentieth-century American history, one that by its focus upon the unique experience of a remarkable professional community (and of the powerful discipline it practiced) is enlightening and persuasive. Even more to the point, as with all of historical argument, the proof of the propositions it advances must be found in the telling.