THE SATURATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL CLASSES

For most of this century, professionalism, and the attitudes and public values associated with it, have been treated with exaggerated respect, so much so that most of us don't question the profound ways in which professionals affect us.

Architecture, to paraphrase what he said, is an extremely complex art. It is sensitive to the professional field, one that responds to and is shaped by the complexities of urban life. Since it is so important and so complex, it can only be understood by professional experts, which is to say, those who are, as it were, "intimate" with the profession. The profession should be discussed, judged and regulated only by its expert practitioners, just as it has been for most of this century. Amateurs are dangerous, he implied.

He went further to describe why I was a particularly dangerous amateur. I won't repeat the really funny details, except to note that at one point he made the Nasarene gesture of implying that I was a Conme Carbide. As his crowing paused, he inferred, I think, that I was little more than a leprous pump for my own chocolate phrases. Whatever truth there is in his charges isn't the point, however — the violence of his response indicates that I'd hit an exposed nerve.

Subsequent to the publication of the rebuttal, I've discovered that my acquaintances within the architectural community have real difficulty responding to the issue the curator unwittingly raised about professionalism, its meaning, its rights and duties. And the issue is worth repeating in its bare formulation: Is architecture (or any other profession) a subject matter best kept within the purview of professionals in the field?

The suburbs now hold the majority of the population and a considerably greater preponderance of the region's children. The official reason given for choosing the west-side site was that it is close to existing medical amenities. The real reason, one suspects, is rather closer to the kinds of amenities noted above. Similarly, a recent court decision has headed off an attempt by the government to channel incoming doctors to the areas that need them. This, ruled the court, is an abrogation of the doctors' entrepreneurial rights.

And entrepreneurs they have become. In 1961, after a revenue-interest government negotiation forced their fee structure downward slightly, the doctors responded by billing more frequently. The result was a de facto increase in average gross income of more than 20 percent. No other explanation is possible; they simply generated business for themselves. Other professions, with varying degrees of success and efficiency depending on the degree of service monopoly they enjoy, pursue the same self-regulating isolation from economic, political and social reality and justice. And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

In other countries, self-regulated professionals operate with similar privileges. During the 1970s, the Argentine military became the envy of military professionals across the world, spawning a whole new set of professional and ethical precedents that are currently being followed wherever bananas will grow — practices that are dreamed of in many countries where bananas are kept in the fruitwards and supermarkets. Infra-agency incursion of political enemies, the administrative technique of "disappearing" dissidents and the creative use of helicopters in obtaining information were all pioneered by these self-regulating Argentine professionals. Thirty-thousand people died in the process, although the exact number, ironical enough in our world of statistical exactitude, will never be known.

Arguably, the Argentine example is an extreme one, but as an illustration of what an overabundance of entrepreneurialized professionals can create, it has validity. What occurred in Argentina took place at least in part because the upper echelons of the military were overcrowded with trained, ambitious professionals able to operate more or less without direct public control. Luckily, we do not have Argentina's history of political violence, but we do have an overabundance of professionals in nearly every field except the military. They are, for the most part, under the same marginal levels of public supervision and they too, are, in all appearances, stuck with a similar entrepreneurial spirit.

Because this kind of overabundance in the professional classes is evidenced in modern civilization, and because it is a phenomenon grounded in relatively obtuse social-economic data rather than ideology, it has been hard to read. For the mass part, our society operates as if it has for the last century: professionals are universally regarded as a crucial ingredient to social and economic well-being, and are accorded automatic privileges and in aura of social dignity, while for a decade now graduates in most fields have had to scramble for employment — often unsuccessfully, like ordinary wage labourers.

Amongst architects, competition is perhaps the most fierce, and the unemployment levels are highest. Only the truly gifted or well-connected graduates now find work as architects. The rest end up as draftsmen or carpenters. Many of them abandon the profession altogether, and become entrepreneurs of one sort or another. They've been well-trained.

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Budgists don’t appear to be shrinking that much, but classroom sizes are growing again, high-contact professionals and sub-professional services are being replaced by video-based route teaching technology while the middle managers argue with disgruntled 3-A conservatives within the government and amongst the public over whether their children should be educated to live in Disneyland or in the 19th century.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of saturation amongst legal professionals. The entrepreneurial spirit has been around in this profession long enough for Shakespeare to have made one of his characters suggest killing all lawyers as a way of lessening corruption, and most of us have heard the old gags about disaster-chasing lawyers or the more recent ones that tell us that sharks don’t bite lawyers as a professional courtesy. A more serious indicator of the effects of saturation might be the massive increase in civil litigation in the last two decades and the increasing tendency of government, business and labour to seek the solutions to political and moral problems through the courts.

The internal workings of the legal profession are undoubtedly the most vigorously protected from public scrutiny, and this is not likely to be altered easily so long as the profession continues to generate so large a portion of our elected political representatives. For a time, a decade ago, lawyers seemed bent on providing universal and relatively democratic access to legal justice, and to their credit, the profession has landed on the liberal side of most issues involving the provision (or withholding) of rights and privileges in society. But since about 1980, legal aid budgets and legal education programmes have shrunk considerably, and the profession has been, at the very least, ineffectual in fighting the cuts. A cynical view would have them preoccupied with their investment losses, or transfixed by the promise of entrepreneurial opportunities afforded by the new constitution and the legal bureaucracy it seems to engendering.

Just recently there has been an outbreak of blame incidents in which social protection agencies have violated the rights of individuals. Sometimes, no doubt, there were good reasons behind the actions taken, but more than once or twice instances carry remarkably transparent evidence that the agency involved was creating business for itself. What society is being subjected to, as these professionals run around drumming up business for themselves, is a phenomenon that should be called “pathology”, aimed at identifying — or generating — herebefore hidden social problems. Child molesting, anorexia nervosa and incest have been subjected to this kind of hysteria-creating professional entrepreneurship. The methods used to identify and seek out perpetrators and victims are reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition.

Only the dominant ethos of our society, and, not surprisingly, it has pulsed out a whole hierarchy of professionals for itself in direct measure to the recognition that no one really understands how money works. While there is some accuracy in the response, it also contains some brutal ironies. The proliferation of economic think-tanks is an illustration of how a profession, faced with the collapse of its theoretical base and growing public distrust of its working, sets up self-serving agencies to generate predictive opinions about what it would like to see happen. The purpose and methods of economic think-tanks have become increasingly politicized and less grounded in research and theory as their predictive accuracies descent to the level of sheer absurdity.

Similarly, the field has generated an army of professional experts in tax evasion and manipulation at the same time as professionals instruct our governments to go on operating the tax system on a car-tax logic, trying to attract industry with convoluted tax concessions which are instantly (and predictably) matched elsewhere. If one accepts that increased government borrowing is a de facto form of taxation, the insanity of this is immediately evident.
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Third, and harder to grasp, is that with the saturation of the professions there has occurred a corresponding decay in theoretical research and the ethical thinking that, in the early days, always accompanied professional activities. If this extremely dangerous decay is to be reversed, it can be accomplished only if the general public demands a coherent accounting of professional procedures and privileges.

It is unlikely that the professions can continue to regulate themselves. Aside from the outbreak of entrepreneurialism, their main response to saturation thus far has been to specialize. At first specialization might have been an accurate reaction to the saturated environment, which is highly competitive and self-regulating at the same time, it rarely accomplishes what it sets out to do — except to generate more work. Specialization has become a means of generating business, despite the isolated and very well-publicized miracles it produces. They make good news, but they don’t address the essential problem. And with the fashionable but simple-minded political enthusiasm for solving all our difficulties by “unleashing the entrepreneurial spirit”, specialization is becoming socially as well as economically dangerous.

The obvious place to start the debate is at the cornerstone of democracy: public education. During the 1960s, the entrepreneurial spirit in education began to generate an entire and isolated field of education — now called, variously, “adult education” or “continuing studies”. Despite the atavistic basis of this kind of education, it is dangerously misguided. A quick glance through the courses offered by any of the many existing programmes will show that the vast majority of courses offered are aimed at self-improvement, with either a vocational or recreational focus. People can learn to be more vacation-skilled or competitive, or more self-satisfied, ruthless or physically fit. The subject matter offered up is largely social and at times, openly anticlastic. This attitude is now invading the more traditional forms of education as well, but it is right here at the level of voluntary education that it should be challenged. Instead of promoting individual skills, the curriculum should be discussing the fundamental values of our society and the duties, as well as the rights, of citizenship. And that is the subject matter, rightly taken, of the liberal arts.

He liberal arts are out of favour with governments right now, who seem more transfixed than anyone with the idea that only the entrepreneurial energies of society will renew our overextended economy. Most politicians are aggressively convinced that it was the liberalism of the fifties, sixties and seventies that got us into this mess in the first place. In large measure, they are correct. They may also be right about the value of entrepreneurs, but only in a much more limited sense than the one being applied. As much as any single factor, what got us to where we are has been entrepreneurs within our professional classes, the ones who, well-meaning or not, extended service monopolies without regard for the fact that the capacity to provide services has a very direct relation to general wealth.

Only a renewal of liberal arts curriculum can generate the general debate over professionalism that is needed to bring the professions into measure. But first, we have to depersonalize the liberal arts, which have earned a large measure of their currently unpopular status because of the mere of self-serving departmental turf-pulling at our universities and schools.

Liberating them will take an enormous effort and a great deal of political courage. But liberal arts are the accurate subject matter for adult education, and adult education, in the deepest sense, is what we must have.

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