

## Professions in America

**Professional Powers.** A Study of the Institutionalization of Formal Knowledge. ELIOT FREIDSON. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986. xviii, 241 pp. \$20.

Professions and professionalism dominate much of modern life. So familiar are credentials, associations, and examinations that the organization of pure and applied knowledge seems incomprehensible without them. In *Professional Powers*, Eliot Freidson steps back from this familiarity to examine the institutional structure of professions in America today, at the same time bringing recent theoretical debates about professions down to earth. What, for example, does it mean to say that professionals are becoming "proletarianized?" Considering all the data, is there in fact more evidence on one side than the other? Asking and answering such deceptively simple questions, Freidson addresses most of the important problems in the sociology of professions: What is a profession? Which occupations belong in the category? Are "professionals" simply a census category, or are they a distinctive group, perhaps a class? What are the basic credentials of professions and how are they handled by the legal system? Are the professions in decline? Are professions being undermined by organizational employment? Do the professions exercise undue power in the political system? Freidson works steadily through these questions, drawing widely from materials in sociology and the other social sciences, as well as from the professions themselves.

The book can best be appreciated in light of the current situation of theory about professions. In the postwar period, there have been two basic theoretical approaches to the professions. The "functionalists" have seen the professions as social embodiments of abstract knowledge, emphasizing clients' trust in professionals and the independence of professional knowledge from external determination. The "monopolists" have portrayed professions as market groups using their control of knowledge to gain wealth, power, and status from society; professional knowledge might directly reflect political considerations. (Although generally the political lines have been clear—monopolists were the '60's rebellion against the conservative functionalists—so eminent a conservative as Milton Friedman has long taken the monopolist position.) Both the functionalists and the monopolists have worked at a very theoretical level, using data more for

illustration than for verification or theory-building. In contrast, Freidson comes from an empirical and inductive tradition, the Chicago school of Everett Hughes. His earlier books on medicine, although generally claimed by the monopolists, used a variety of techniques—observation, case study, descriptive statistics—to build a general picture of "professional dominance." Thus it is natural that, in his first book-length treatment of the professions in general, Freidson should bring a critical, empirical eye to bear on the excesses of recent theory.

Typical of this critique is Freidson's analysis of the "question of professional decline." He elegantly separates decline into the twin problems of loss of client trust on the one hand and loss of independence on the other. A careful examination of antitrust legislation and enforcement calls in serious question the loss-of-trust argument, and a thorough interpretation of census figures, combined with a thoughtful theoretical discussion of self-employment and of the new professional corporations, undermines the case for loss of independence. Freidson is unfailingly courteous to all parties in these debates and leaves the reader firmly persuaded of the complex ambiguities of current professional institutions.

Unlike many authors, Freidson is refreshingly blunt about the limits of his book. He aims, he tells us, at analytical description rather than theory. He focuses on American professions rather than professions in general. He emphasizes the present rather than the past. For many specialty students, these emphases are problematic, as Freidson is aware. The unresolved theoretical debates of the last 20 years cry out for a theory of professional development that can articulate profession-as-knowledge with profession-as-power, and Freidson, long the dominant American writer on professions, seems uniquely situated to provide the theory. Similarly, the rich studies of both contemporary and past professions in Europe seem to require recasting our very notion of "the category of profession." While Freidson argues effectively that profession may best be considered a "folk concept," properly used only in the United States and Great Britain, in fact many of the controversies he discusses involve the increasing resemblance of American professions to their Continental counterparts, and the decision to exclude these, while improving the accuracy of the American description, forgoes an opportunity for theorizing the "institutionalization

of formal knowledge." Finally, the last 20 years have seen the appearance of dozens of historical monographs on professions, which provide an incomparable resource for social thinking on the subject, and use of this scholarship could have helped extend Freidson's analytical description of the present.

Omissions that may dissatisfy specialists will, however, make the book more attractive to the general reader. Such readers will find here an excellent description of the actual, present situation of professions in the United States. It is a description unclouded by theoretical allegiances, correcting many of the empirical misconceptions of past theories. It offers a sound basis for policy thinking about professions, telling in clear detail the actual status of current policy. In short, Freidson's book is a concise introduction to the professions, challenging specialists with its puncturing of theoretically induced misconceptions and offering general readers a clear but critical entrée to the theoretical literature concerning this central aspect of modern society.

ANDREW ABBOTT  
Department of Sociology,  
Rutgers University,  
New Brunswick, NJ 08903

## Issues of Public Service

**Universities and State Governments.** A Study in Policy Analysis. IRWIN FELLER. Praeger (Greenwood), New York, 1986. xviii, 171 pp. \$32.95. Praeger Special Studies.

This study examines the troubles that arise between state government and institutions of higher education when the state seeks help from its universities in framing public policy. These troubles have their deepest roots in the states' expectation that, in addition to their teaching and research activities, universities—especially public institutions—will also provide services to the states in which they are located and from which they derive financial support. More specifically, many governors, legislators, and other state officials have long been puzzled as to why the enormous resources that states pour into institutions of higher education do not generate in return a greater willingness on the part of university personnel to help the state deal with the varied problems it confronts in such areas as environmental pollution, welfare dependency, or crime control. Why should the chief source of expertise in a state be of so little use in coping with issues that increasingly seem to demand the help of experts for their solution?