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Professions and Social Order in a Global Society¹

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the concept of the professions departing from Adam Smith's book *The wealth of nations*. It discusses about the factors that affect the recognition toward different types of occupations, as well as the reasons of the inevitable emergence of professions in modern societies. Nineteen century facts of England and the United States are considered as context for the discussion toward the professions, between contemporary analysts. Finally, challenges that globalization imposes to the professions are glimpsed, considering restrictive practices that block the flexibility, essential in the European, Asian and American economies.

Key words: Globalization, professions, social order.

We trust our health to the physician; our fortune and sometimes our life and reputation to the lawyer and attorney. Such confidence could not safely be reposed in people of a very mean or low condition. Their reward must be such, therefore, as may give them that rank in the society which so important a trust requires. The long time and the great expense laid out in their education, when combined with this circumstance, necessarily enhance still further the price of their labour (Smith, 1776/1976a, p. 118).

It is about ten years since I first came across this passage in *The wealth of nations*, Adam Smith's foundational contribution to modern social science. It comes from a discussion of factors affecting the rewards of different kinds of occupations. Most of these fit more or less readily into the neoclassical model of labour supply, where wages are related to the conditions of work, the amount of investment needed to learn particular skills, the continuity of employment and the probability of success. As Paul Fenn and I noted, however, the idea that people might be paid more to secure trust had puzzled many economists (Dingwall & Fenn, 1987). Some of this may have diminished in more recent years as economists have become more interested in the question of trust and the extent to which markets depend upon non-market values and institutions for their effective functioning. These issues have been extensively popularized in the recent work of Francis Fukuyama (1995), for instance, where he points to the competitive disadvantages of low-trust societies, in which regulation has to substitute for honourable economic behaviour.

This paper continues my reflections on this text because I think it contains some very important clues to the questions about why professions emerge, what they are for and, just possibly, why they are inevitable in modern societies.

Adam Smith, trust and the liberal professions

It is important to acknowledge that Smith often uses the word *profession* where we might now prefer to use the word *occupation*: however, the passages in Book 1 of *The wealth of nations* draw a clear distinction between skilled labour or mechanic trades, common labour and "liberal professions" (Smith, 1776/1976a, pp. 112-50). The latter include law, medicine,² the clergy and a less clearly-defined group of teachers, scholars, intellectuals and artists. They are all in various ways in the business of trust, although for the last group, this is spelt out more clearly in Smith's other major work, *The theory of moral sentiments* (Larkin, 1983; Muller, 1993; Smith, 1776/1976a). I will come back to the implications of this. First, however, let me complete the discussion of the market niche occupied by this group. Smith also justifies their high earnings by reference to the tedious and expensive nature of their education and to the improbability of success: "In a profession where twenty fail for one that succeeds, that one ought to gain all that should have been gained by the unsuccessful twenty" (Smith 1776/1976a, pp. 118-119). However, he questions whether this is actually the case. People are not deterred from seeking entry by the nature of the lottery, because they

believe that they have a real chance of winning. The prize, though, is not solely fortune but also reputation: "The public admiration...makes a considerable part of that reward in the profession of physic; a still greater part perhaps in that of law; in poetry and philosophy it makes almost the whole" (Smith, 1776/1976a, p. 119). Reputation plays a very important part in Smith's theory of motivation, what has been described as his *commercial humanism* (Muller, 1993). People in Smith's world are not driven solely by the pursuit of material gain but also by the symbolic rewards of others' good opinion.

The moral dimension of professions as a class of occupations is emphasised in Smith's later discussion of competition policy when he wonders whether it is "indecent" to compare the pay of a curate or chaplain to that of a "journeyman in any common trade", although the actual figures are similar. This discussion has some other striking features. It forms part of a chapter which looks at distortions in the labour market. The first section examines the effects of guilds and corporations in restricting competition and contains many of Smith's most celebrated criticisms of these bodies as conspiracies against the public or contrivances to extract excess profits. The real controls on quality are the disciplines of the market, supplemented where necessary by hallmarks on the product, rather than, say, the length of apprenticeship. Most trades could be easily learned in a few weeks. However, his discussion of the liberal professions begins as a contrast between the knowledge and experience required for their practice and that of other trades. He remarks on the way that they face in greater degree the challenge faced by farmers of working with constantly variable materials and instruments which "require to be managed with much judgement and discretion" (Smith, 1776/1976a, p. 142). The knowledge of farmers, artists and the liberal professions cannot be standardized in the same way as that of a mechanic trade. Interestingly, Smith never questions the value of a professional education: it is long, tedious and expensive but not irrelevant or inappropriate as most apprenticeships are said to be. For Smith the professions illustrate the effects of market distortions that create excessive competition. Law and medicine have an approximation of supply and demand which gives successful practitioners reasonable rewards. Clergy and scholars, however, face a market overcrowded by the misguided philanthropy that has created a raft of bursaries, scholarships, exhibitions, etc which lower the price of entry and produce an excessive supply of qualified people whose earnings are then driven remorselessly downwards. The result of overproduction in other areas would be the "entire degradation of the now respectable professions of law and physic" (Smith, 1776/1976a, p. 147).

It must be acknowledged that Smith does not make an argument for professional corporations as the method of managing supply: he seems to be more inclined to leave this to the market solution of ensuring that entrants meet the full cost of their education. However, he clearly identifies a special group of occupations. They have a distinctive moral character and a high level of public reputation. Their practice requires a special kind of skill and judgement and is necessarily based on a lengthy training. All of these combine, in theory, to restrict supply and to justify high incomes, although market distortions may undercut this.

Smith's focus on the liberal professions in these ways is particularly noteworthy given that the conventional view of the forerunners of modern professions in the eighteenth century tends to draw a picture of chaos, corruption and incompetence. I suspect, although I cannot yet fully document this, that such a picture reflects the extent to which historians have focussed on England, and on London in particular, rather than taking account of the distinctive society of Lowland Scotland. Looking at Smith's group of liberal professions, he explicitly draws distinctions between clergy and scholars in Scotland and in England, being particularly critical of the idleness of Oxford professors (Smith, 1776/1976a, 284-285). From other sources, we could note that Edinburgh medicine was closely in touch with Dutch medicine, then the leading school in Europe, and that the Roman-Dutch nature of Scots law required a kind of systematic training that the common law did not demand in England. It is clear that Smith based much of his work on careful observation of the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution as they went on around him in Scotland and there is no reason to suppose his account of the professions in a modern society to be any different.

As a result of this, we must be careful not to make Smith sound like an attribute theorist before the event. He may have described certain characteristics shared by a group of occupations but these pivot around two things which, in his view, are real discriminators between professions and the guilds of mechanical trades. All corporations claimed to promote the trustworthiness of their members and the esoteric knowledge of their members. Smith rejected these assertions in all cases other than those of the professions. In other words, he thought that their market niche was founded upon an objective difference. Trust mattered with professional services and they did have relevant esoteric knowledge which was needed to deal with the variability and uncertainty of their work.

I shall come back to the issue of uncertainty later. For the moment I just want to add a few more words about trust. One of the particular contributions of the Scottish Enlightenment to social thought was its proposal of an alternative to the idea that social order rested on some sort of fictive compact, contract or convention, of the kind proposed by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and others. The Scots went back to the Stoic writings of Ancient Greece to naturalize order. In effect, Smith and his contemporaries invented much of what we would now call *symbolic interactionism* (Muller, 1993, pp. 101-112). Order in society did not emerge from an agreement to create an authority or an explicit body of rules which everyone would obey. It emerged in a more spontaneous fashion. Our natural desire for relationships with others and for their approval leads us to treat their reactions as the mirror to observe our own conduct and, from observing what actions have what effects, to learn what is fit and proper behaviour. However, it is not merely enough to produce this: we also aspire to a sense that we merit it for our sincerity, that we have behaved with propriety because it is the right thing to do rather than because we hope to gain some advantage. In the same way, we need to be able to trust the reflection, that the other's response is also sincere.

The process of reflection can sometimes be mediated through symbols. When you give me a piece of paper in return for a good or service, it is the trust between us that

makes this into a unit of currency. The exchange rests upon your confidence in my warranty for the good or service and mine that I can take your paper to someone else who will also trust its value. The transaction encodes a long train of trust relationships (Hayek, 1945). However, as Smith notes, there is a difference between warranting a claim to quality in a material product –hallmarking gold or silver items and stamping linen and woollen cloth are the examples he gives– and making the same claim to be able to heal the sick, manage a law suit, teach philosophy or preserve the immortal soul. How do I know that I can trust your promise? The action you are going to perform lies in the future, is attended with much uncertainty and I cannot easily judge what part you have played in the outcome. You say you will heal me but we shall all die some time. Has my time come? You say you will win my case but the other lawyer has promised their client the same. You say I will go to heaven but I shall find out in the next world rather than this one. An important part of this trust reposes in the conduct of our interpersonal relationship that the professional comports himself as a professional could reasonably be expected to (Smith, 1759/1976b, pp. 201-204, 209). This is an important observation for would-be reformers of professional/client interaction. However, it does not solve the ultimate problem of sincerity. This person is behaving like a lawyer or a physician: how do I know they really are one? In the small-scale society of Lowland Scotland in the eighteenth century, this may not be a huge difficulty. In the contemporary world, it is much more serious. The larger societies become in scale and the more complex they become, the more difficult it becomes to check that the other does indeed have the skills that they claim.

Trust, uncertainty and the liberal state

I have put some emphasis on the extent to which Smith's thinking is likely to reflect his own experience of eighteenth century Scotland. In the same way, I want to comment on some features of nineteenth century England and the USA as a background to a discussion of contemporary analysts. Perkin (1989) describes the period since 1880 as the rise of professional society. I am, however, rather more interested in the first half of the nineteenth century and the social movements that led to the licensure of the major professions by the 1880s. This might be described as the period of market closure, when the foundations of modern monopolies were established. However, I think it may be better examined as a process of institution-building, when the problems of an open market became apparent and societies sought to find a solution to the problem of trust. How could the providers of these services be defined in a way that would assure their quality?

Herbert Spencer, perhaps the greatest contemporary analyst of nineteenth century society, tended to view the development of human societies as a movement from what he described as *indefinite homogeneity* to *definite heterogeneity*. Durkheim later substantially plagiarized this in his discussion of *mechanical and organic solidarity*. Although there is much variation in the substantive applicability of either version, they do actually characterize the emergence of modern professional corporations quite well. Looking at the market for healing at the end of the eighteenth century in both England and the USA, we can see a vast range of providers from herbalists,

bonesetters and handywomen through grocer/druggists to apothecaries, surgeons and physicians. Although there is a great variety of healing systems and practices on offer, these do not map neatly onto any particular kind of provider and many seem to have been entirely eclectic. By the end of the century, in both countries, this market has been more or less neatly tidied up with roles assigned by law to certain groups and particular theories given legitimation as the officially-recognized knowledge of medicine. Other groups and theories had been excluded and delegitimated. The picture in law was very similar, although the clerical profession and the intellectual profession were rather less clearly organized for reasons I shall discuss later. Other professions are becoming identifiable in the form of accountants and engineers and a guild or corporatist model has become established as the basic institutional form of the profession. What has happened here?

For the best part of a generation, we have assumed that the process was essentially one of regulatory capture, that professions were better organized as occupations than were the guilds attacked by Smith and that, as a result, they were able to capture and close markets, to create favourable regulatory conditions or market shelters in Eliot Freidson's phrase. Perhaps the most influential statement has been Larson's (1977) discussion of the rise of professionalism as a collective mobility project:

I see professionalization as the process by which producers of special services sought to constitute and control a market for their expertise. Because marketable expertise is a crucial element in the structure of modern inequality, professionalization appears also as a collective assertion of special social status and as a collective process of upward social mobility (pxvi.).

However, I think it has been arguable that the power of Larson's rhetoric has led many of her followers to neglect two important qualifications. The first is her acknowledgement that the market is not passive:

...the structure of the market in which a profession transacts its services does not depend on the profession's action and intentions –or at least not until the professions gains considerable social power. The structure of a particular professional market is determined by the broader social structure (pp.17-18).

She illustrates this in some detail as she analyses the limited power of professional institutions in engineering, relative to medicine, for example, in terms of the different balance between a profession serving powerful corporate clients as opposed to individuals. She also accepts the role of the state: "...to view professional modernization as a project of market control, underlines the central role of the state in the development of this project... (p. 18)". Having made this concession, however, she offers little analysis of the state, tending to see this as a mere vehicle for the interests of capital.

Larson's position is very typical of a line of work which has focussed on "occupational imperialism", to use Larkin's phrase (Parry & Parry, 1976; Parkin, 1979; Larkin, 1983). However, although it continues to be fashionable, as in the recent work of Witz

(1992), there has been increasing disquiet about both the theoretical and the empirical basis of this argument. Johnson, for example, whose neo-Marxist analysis prefigured Larson's work, has moved steadily away from an occupation-oriented position to one which places increasing emphasis on the interdependence of professions and the state (Johnson, 1995; Johnson, 1982; Johnson, 1977; Johnson, 1972). Fenn and I pointed to the general weakness of occupation-oriented analyses in explaining why the state chose to create market shelters through favourable regulation: at any historical point far more occupations were seeking this protection than were ever afforded it (Dingwall & Fenn, 1987). We suggested that professionalization might be a response to market failure rather than a form of market failure, as the conventional view proposed.

This shift from what I have come to call *demand* theories of professionalization to *supply* theories (Dingwall, 1995), in other words from stressing the occupation's organized pursuit of its interest to the environmental conditions under which it is made, also seems more consistent with the empirical studies that are now being done. I made the point in the context of a reanalysis of Holloway's (1991) study of the formation of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society in Britain, where I argued that the decisive moves to licensure owed less to the organization of pharmacists than to state responses to moral panic about the increasingly potent organic compounds that were becoming available and to a state project to tidy up the market for health care provision in support of its own developing stake in public health. Halliday's (1987) study of the Chicago Bar, for example, had already pointed the incoherence of the idea of a professional project in a large and divided group and to the need to take seriously more structural analyses of the market and the state in creating the space within which professions operated. Although Abbott (1988) underplays the influence of the state, his analysis of the division of labour as a field of turf battles and his emphasis on the need for a systemic understanding of professions in relation to their environments and markets also directs our attention away from the kind of single case study that has often led to overgeneralization. More recently, Light's (1995) discussion of professions in the context of political science notions of countervailing powers has started to catch us up academically with what any common-sense observer in the UK would have noticed for the last few years, namely that what professions have won or been given, can be lost or removed. His argument would perhaps be more familiar cast in economic terms: that the exploitation of a long-run market disequilibrium will ultimately lead to the emergence of opposing forces or the reorganization of production or supply to eliminate this rent. His particular target is the US medical profession, where the perception by major industrial corporations that high health insurance costs are imposing an international competitive disadvantage has finally brought interests of comparable weight into the political process. Perhaps General Motors and Ford can check the growth of medical incomes where consumer lobbies cannot. We are witnessing a similar struggle in the UK where the attempted reform of civil justice procedures, for the second time in a decade, is intended to have a direct effect on the profitability of legal work.

Perhaps, then, the time has come for a re-reading of the historical case studies on which the demand theory has been based and for a new attention to the relations

between occupations and between occupations, markets and the state which sees the emergence of modern professions as a more complex story of the conjunction of interests and ideologies that we call modernization. In doing so, we may need to reappraise some earlier and neglected contributions. One of these will clearly be that of Talcott Parsons (1954). Whatever else we may say about his work, his perception of the extent to which professions were a creation of the modern world was absolutely fundamental:

The fact that the professions have reached a uniquely high level of development in the same society which is also characterized by a business economy suggests that the contrast between business and the professions, which has been mainly stated in terms of the problem of self-interest, is not the whole story (Parsons, 1954, p. 35).

However, this evening I want to focus for a few minutes on Herbert Spencer's contribution to the analysis of professions, which Michael King and I have been revisiting (Dingwall & King, 1995).

Herbert Spencer was the most influential English-language sociologist of the nineteenth century, whose contributions have now been largely forgotten. However, our interest is not purely archaeological. Spencer observed the high period of industrial capitalism and was more responsible than anyone else for the introduction of systems thinking to sociology from his prior experience in engineering and biology. In his analysis of the dynamic of social change through ecological competition, he frames an account that was later taken up by Chicago sociology, first in examining the city and then in studying work and occupations. Although Abbott does not recognize it, his discussion of jurisdictional competition stands in a direct line of descent. Where the Chicago studies tended to emphasise local conflicts, however, Spencer saw that competition was a selection pressure at all levels of social organization. State formation, for example, was promoted by inter-group competition: war was part of the dynamic of progress at a certain period of human history.

Spencer sees the emergence of professions as intimately linked to the development of modern industrial states. In early phases of national development, societies tend to adopt what he calls the militant form with a tightly controlled command economy and central planning. However, this is a costly form of society to maintain because of the resources which are consumed in maintaining order and control. It lacks incentives for innovation and enterprise because rewards and goals are allocated by central planners rather than in proportion to individual contributions or initiatives. In times of peace, militant societies tend to be displaced by industrial forms which are marked by voluntary co-operation and forms of control designed to promote and support spontaneous order rather than to impose it. As with Webber, Spencer saw religion as playing an important part in the process. Its supernatural connections gave it a measure of autonomy from a militant state and its concerns for motivation and inner belief tended to make it an ally of industrial states. In the process, however, its sacred character is transferred to other, secular bodies. Some of these are the professions:

Professions are not only the bearers of scientific knowledge; they are also, in effect, the secular guardians of the sacred, the priesthood of the modern world, but a priesthood which acknowledges the ultimate unknowability of things, deals in uncertainties, and recognizes the openness of the world to change. The professional system is the regulating system of the modern society, whose function is to accommodate society to this reality (Dingwall & King, 1995, pp. 18-19).

At the heart of Spencer's scheme is a more positive view of professions as people with real skills and a beneficial contribution to society. They emerge at a stage when the basic needs of survival, order and production have been met and adopt the unique role of focussing on enhancing the quality of life. In the process, they also make possible a more loosely-coupled society where control is decentralized, hierarchies are flattened and boundaries made permeable. As Johnson (1995) has recently noted, from a different theoretical direction, in modern societies, professions are not opposed to states, nor are they part of them: rather professions and states perform sometimes complementary and sometimes competitive roles in a system of regulation, control or ordering which is greater than either.

With Spencer's concern for the sacred character of professional work, we also return to the theme of uncertainty that I identified in the work of Adam Smith. This is a notion which is also central to the work of Hughes (1971) when he writes about the "guilty knowledge" of professionals. One way in which we might see the emergence of professions in the nineteenth century is as a reflection of the process of modernization that formed the classic object of sociology. Old certainties had indeed disappeared but the need for certainty remained. The organization of lives depends upon the creation of certainty. On some occasions we need for all practical purposes ways of deciding the meaning of texts or resolving disputes without violence. Of course texts can be indefinitely reconstructed and disputes closed in many ways but one of the things which law supplies is a practical and legitimated certainty. If we are investing our capital in a major engineering project like a dam, a railway or a bridge, then we need some assurance that it will perform its intended function. Of course no engineer can guarantee that a suspension bridge will stand up in the face of a once in a hundred years climatic event unless it is built at a cost that would be wholly uneconomic: however, his or her professional judgement is the practical certainty that makes our investment possible. It is the foundation of our trust that the world is a less uncertain place than it might seem, were we constantly to reflect upon it. The nineteenth century is also the period of unification of societies. As even the smallest villages became drawn into the national society and economy, they came to need a consistent basis for dealing with each other. I suggest that it was this logic as much as any occupational imperialism that closed markets. When you develop a national framework of public health and social assistance provision, sustained by national taxation, then you must have a reasonably consistent means of interpreting and applying it. The village healer lost out precisely because she or he was only the village healer whose skills and legitimacy were acknowledged no further than that community. A large scale society demands comparable institutions to sustain and regulate it. These are not all to be found in the state but the modern nation-state could not have evolved without their co-evolution.

These observations also help to make sense of two otherwise puzzling phenomena. One is the variation between professions. Every commentator since Smith has noticed the differential distributions of material and symbolic rewards between different professions. However, the reasons for this have remained largely unexplored, beyond Smith's comments on the level of competition. Why should levels of competition vary, though? Why do some professions have more effective monopolies and the power to extract rents as well as status? I suspect that there may be an answer to be found by considering the relationship between professions and the state in the management of order. The least rewarded and least regulated professions are those which are seen as most marginal to the maintenance of social integration over a national territory. In many societies, the dispersal of the preservation of the sacred with the break-up of the politico-ecclesiastical complex left the clergy with a largely residual role in which the state has often shown a relatively limited interest. In some, however, the clerical interest retained a hold over other professions that gave it a central position of power and influence within the nation. Ireland might be an example where the health professions remained subordinated to the Catholic hierarchy until relatively recent years. We might also note the varying status of the educational profession according to whether the educational system is seen merely as a supplier of technical labour or as the creator of morally-formed citizens in the way that some Mainland European states have viewed it.

The other point that I would draw to your attention is the way in which the ecclesiastical background provided the models of occupational organization adopted by professions. I sometimes think that one of the neglected topics of historical sociology is the influence of the churches on later secular organizational forms. Many of the techniques of discipline associated by Foucault with the nineteenth century, for example, have recognizable precursors in the monastic rules of earlier periods. In the same way, if we ask where the model of a self-governing corporation comes from, the answer must surely be certain religious orders and their subsidiary foundations in the medieval universities which survived the culling of the guilds. The gap left in Smith's account for the choice of an organizational form for an occupational corporation might be filled by Spencer's understanding of the sacred sources of professional work.

I have, I hope, painted a picture of the place of professions in the modern world which uses more colours in its palette than the monochrome of occupational imperialism that has dominated for so long. In doing so, I also hope that I have also begun to lay out a basis for thinking about professions in the *contemporary* world. I use this term advisedly because of my profound suspicion of the windy rhetoric of post-modernity. Nevertheless, I think that we do need to acknowledge the force of certain changes as we approach the second millennium of the Christian era.

Professions in a global society

Superficially, the times do not look propitious for professions. We are constantly told that the deregulation of labour markets is a crucial condition for success in the global

marketplace. Monopolies, cartels, unions, restrictive practices are seen as obstacles to the kind of flexibility that is essential for the tired economies of Europe and North America to compete with the Pacific Tigers. (Curiously, monopolies, cartels, etc. among producers get described as necessary economies of scale!) Professions seem to be classic cases for attack under such conditions. Certainly in the UK we have seen a sustained governmental attack on many of our national professions over the last fifteen years. Without going into detail, there has been a range of deregulatory measures particularly affecting health professions, lawyers and architects. However, I wonder just how significant some of these changes will turn out to be and whether the global market will not discover that it actually needs to invent global professions.

The essence of the models that have been used in this presentation is, of course, that we should not expect professions to be static. Societies are constantly changing. The post-modernists did not discover flux: it was part of the spur to the creation of sociology. If we have lost sight of that it is because for 20 or 30 years after World War 2, many of us thought that we lived in a stable world, where major problems of welfare and ideology had been solved. It was not the first occasion when the poets saw that the times they were a-changing more rapidly than did the intellectuals. Ever since, we have been struggling to catch up, to think about the world in the way that people like Smith or Spencer or, for that matter, Marx originally did. These were observers who knew from their own experience how fast things were changing around them and were trying to capture this in the language of social theory. We know that the professions we see today have very little other than symbolic continuity with the occupational groups that bore the same labels in the medieval or early modern period. The persistence of that continuity is not unimportant: the invention or reinvention of connections with the past has a significance in its choice of means of professional legitimation. We also know that professions can, in a sense, disappear: Starr's (1982) account of the rise of the medical profession in the US also reminds us that, during the Jacksonian period in the first half of the nineteenth century, the states dismantled virtually all of the licensing protection that migrant physicians had been able to create on the basis of European models. It was only later in the century as the states reappraised their roles in society and rationalized their own operations that professions were recreated in modern forms. The experience of this period might suggest that contemporary states might find it hard to do without professions. Indeed, talking to colleagues in other English-language universities, I am often struck by the demand from the so-called Tiger economies for a traditional professional education. I suspect that many UK law schools would struggle economically without their recruitment from Malaysia, for example.

Of course, there are longer-term processes at work. If I am right in suggesting that professions have a particular relationship with the sacred, then they cannot expect to be immune from the continuing transformation of that sphere. One of my early mentors adopted this quotation from *The New York review of books*: "As human control widens and is consolidated, the resultant shrinkage of the unknown will curtail divine prerogatives. All weather gods are diminished by meteorology" (Horobin, 1983, p. 104). If we are living through a dis-enchantment of the world as part of the condition of modernity, then occupations associated with enchantment are likely to

decline. But I suspect that there are limits to this process. Theorists of post-modernity point to the torrent of information that is available to us. A surfer's roll on the World Wide Web will offer us expertise on anything. For some, indeed, cyberspace is the new realm of the sacred. And yet many of the great social theorists of our century have pointed to the impossibility of knowing everything. The practical solution to this problem is one of the core preoccupations of Schutz's work, for example (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974). Hayek gave great attention to the problems of uncertainty and limited information in economic life (Hayek, 1945; Gamble, 1996). The concern may be best defined by Simmel, a key precursor to both:

To be sure the innumerable errors and superstitions in the life of primitive man are harmful enough to him, but far less so than are corresponding ones in advanced epochs, because the practice of his life is guided in the main by those few facts and circumstances of which his narrow angle of vision permits him to gain directly a correct view. In a richer and larger cultural life, however, existence rests on a thousand premises which the single individual cannot trace and verify to their roots at all, but must take on faith. Our modern life is based to a much larger extent than is usually realised upon the faith in the honesty of the other (Simmel, 1950, p. 313).

In principle, we might be able to check anything: in practice life is too short. The expansion of information does not make us any more skilled at evaluating it. As we all recognize, the difficult thing is not collecting data but knowing what it means. It might be argued that judgement can also be computerized, that some sources might be hallmarked. But, as Smith saw, that kind of approach becomes more difficult to operate with less tangible products or services. I suspect that it will be very hard to eliminate intermediaries, whose ability to interpret information and apply it to our case will rest on familiar legitimations. By managing this, professionals allow the rest of us to have a life and it does not seem to me likely that we will readily forego this gain from the moral division of labour. Weather-god or meteorologist, the professional is our means of reducing uncertainty about important things that we cannot easily or economically verify for ourselves.

If I suggest that this is one aspect of the market for professional services, another might be the emergence of state-like formations above the level of the nation. Here again I think we return to the insights of Smith and Spencer. There is a sense in which globalization recapitulates an eighteenth and nineteenth century experience. One of the great transformations that the classic sociologists observed was the creation of effective national markets. Trade was not defined by the speed of a wagon or the carrying capacity of a pack animal. Canals, turnpikes and railways opened up and unified nations. Further advances in the division of labour became possible as areas specialized in goods for which they had a comparative advantage. The accelerated and democratized mobility of peoples unified national cultures and created national languages. Starr (1982, pp. 69-71) has noted the impact of the automobile and the telephone on medical practice. He suggests that they led to productivity gains of the order of 300 per cent, reducing cost and increasing accessibility. I am not aware of similar calculations for other professions but I would be surprised if they were very different. It became increasingly possible for everyone to live within reach of a

professional and to be able to travel over longer distances to sustain specialism in practice. At the same time, these material changes facilitated the kind of cultural standardization that I have noted. A rural community in the 1870s might have had no choice but to use a traditional midwife for a home delivery: by the 1920s that community would be within the catchment of an officially licensed practitioner and might well have sufficient means of transport to move a woman in labour to a hospital.

The choice of birthplace and birth attendant became a real choice. A common theme in recent Westerns has been the bringing of order to the frontier. In the absence of judges, lawyers and law-enforcement, people had to settle their own disputes in their own ways. By the 1890s, the spread of the railroads and the creation of national markets made this increasingly difficult to sustain. A chain of contracts stretching from the Southwest through the Mid-West to the East Coast could not dependably rest on the gun to define property rights in land or cattle. National markets required national law, national accountancy and so on. When the great capital projects of the period were being undertaken, an important part of the security for investors was the certified skills of the constructors. The first railways may have been built by self-taught engineers but, by the end of the century, elaborate systems of apprenticeship and formal examination had developed.

If we recognize the symbiotic role of professionals and markets, then we can see the functional logic of their globalization. Spencer thought that the nation state would be a passing phase in human society. He was very critical of its extension through colonialism, where the organization of colonial economic life was subordinated to that of the metropolis. In his view, non-European peoples should have been brought into a regime of free international trade that would allow them to identify for themselves where their comparative advantages lay and to concentrate on these. However, that market would still require an order: a contract would need to be a contract, wherever it was made. It is this, I suspect, that will pull the professions into a global organization of some kind which transcends that of the nation state. If we look at the international marketplace today, we see much of the unregulated and anarchic capitalism that our predecessors saw. Ultimately, that order proved to be unsustainable. The logic of large-scale enterprise required a degree of management of its organizational environment that tamed the system. When you have to mobilize capital globally to build the Channel Tunnel or the bridge from Sweden to Denmark, then you need engineers whose skill will be acknowledged by every international banker and you need a legal and accounting regime that everybody trusts.

The global order needs trust-promoting groups just as much as the national one did. Those groups will not necessarily be organized in the same way as professions in the era of nation-states. Their descent from national professions may be more symbolic than real, just as with the lineage from the medieval professions to the modern. Global professions may not sit alongside a single state-like entity but form part of a network of international bodies involved in regulating, co-ordinating and managing economic activity and political risk. National professions may co-exist with them in some areas which are less touched by the global order –health and social welfare may be a particular example. If I am convinced of one thing, however, it is that obituaries for the professions are decidedly premature. I suspect that our successors on the eve

of the Third Millennium will still be discussing them with the same mixture of suspicion and admiration.

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² The discussion is clearly intended to include apothecaries as well as physicians, despite the former's closer connection with trade. Smith notes that 'apothecaries' profit' is used as a metaphor for excess or extravagance. In reality, however, it represented the value added to the actual drugs sold by the skill and trustworthiness of the vendor (Smith, 1776/1976a: I, 125).