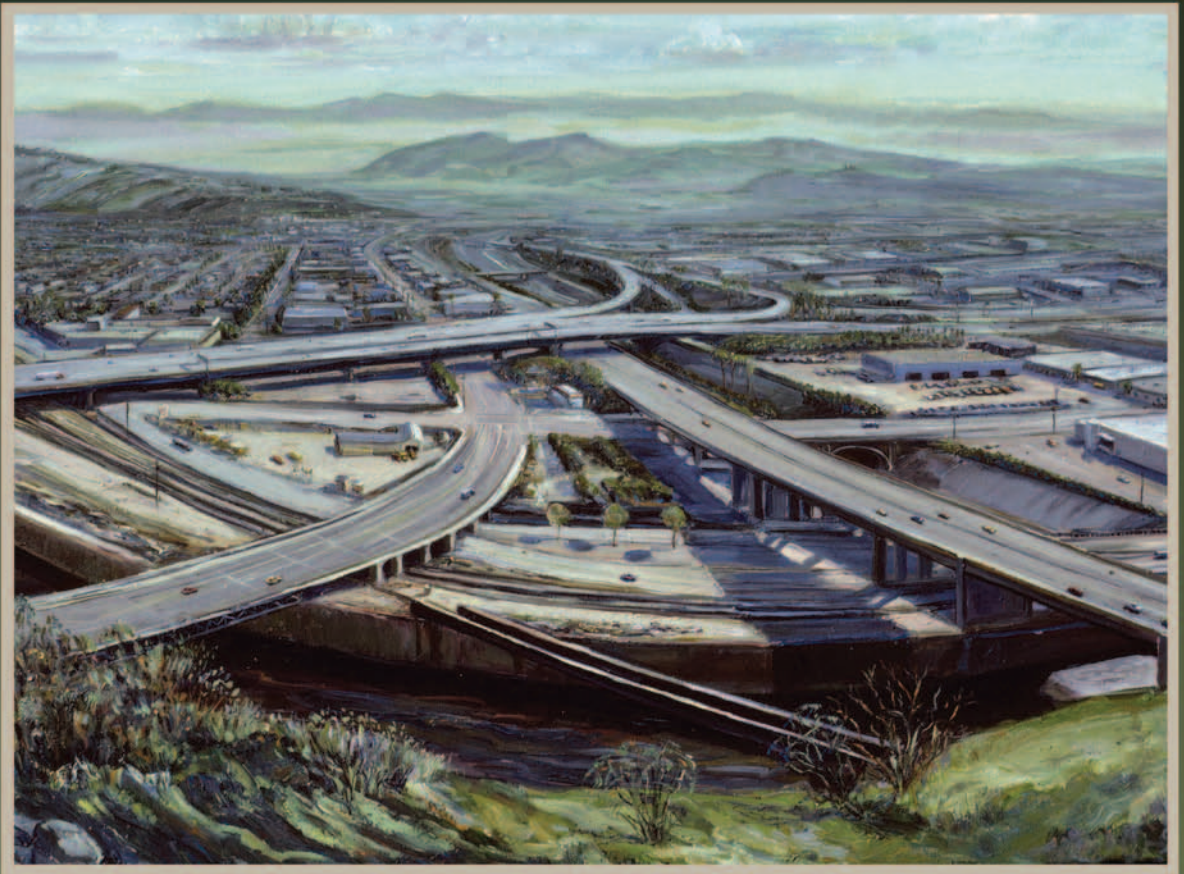


KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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The Ethics and Politics of Professions

by Albert W. Dzur

“The gap between professionalized politics and a mass public is perhaps greater now than it was.”

As Adele Haber lay in a hospital bed staring at the ceiling, down the hall a team of doctors and ethicists were discussing whether she should live or die. The team, at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, is part of a program ... that aims to resolve medical conflicts at the end of life.

In the waiting room of the pulmonary care unit, where a small window air conditioner struggled against the heat, members of the medical staff gathered that Tuesday afternoon to discuss Mrs. Haber's case. The team included ethicists and staff members working with the patient. Nancy Neveloff Dubler [the director of bioethics at Montefiore] led the meeting with a blend of warmth and briskness, drawing out each participant in search of a consensus.

*John Schwartz, “A Team Effort to Resolve Family Bedside Conflicts,”
New York Times, July 4, 2005.*

On a sunny Saturday ... citizens streamed into an auditorium on the University of Pennsylvania campus, wending their way around television trucks and a maze of wires. Inside, seated on a stage, were the five candidates for the Democratic nomination for mayor of Philadelphia.

The questioners this night would not be the usual blow-dried television anchors and print journalists in scruffy shoes. They would be citizens, clutching index cards in their hands. On each card was written a question that represented the fruit of four months of public deliberation involving more than 600 citizens and reaching into every corner of a city that is famed as a

mosaic of neighborhoods. Citizen Voices was one newspaper's [the *Philadelphia Inquirer*] attempt to engage a cross-section of a diverse city in a yearlong civic conversation.

Michelle Charles, Harris Sokoloff, and Chris Satullo, "Electoral Deliberation and Public Journalism," in The Deliberative Democracy Handbook, ed. John Gastil and Peter Levine.

Police caught Craig Langsdorf urinating behind a trash bin last July in downtown Minneapolis. He'd been out drinking with friends, was walking to his car and, well, he had to go.

For his offense, Langsdorf could have pleaded guilty, paid a fine and gone on his way with a petty crime on his record. Instead, he chose to face upset neighbors, take responsibility for his actions, and clean urine off the loading dock of his downtown workplace.

Over two years, this sort of justice has been used ... under a program of the Central City Neighborhoods Partnership, a coalition of neighborhood groups in Minneapolis.

James Walsh, "Restorative Justice Program in Minneapolis Showing Results," Minneapolis Star Tribune, February 16, 2000.



All across the country, similar efforts by reform-minded professionals are bridging gaps between the lay public and key social institutions traditionally dominated by professionals—hospitals and clinics, newspapers and broadcast studios, courtrooms and corrections facilities.

Why have doctors, nurses, and hospital and clinic administrators carved out an institutional place for laypeople incompetent to treat but well equipped to discuss ethical problems related to patient care and institutional standards? Why have these bearers of considerable power over human lives chosen to share some of that power not just sporadically but daily as a feature of organizational life?

Why have journalists, editors, and newspaper owners conducted public forums designed to foster conversations about Social Security, welfare reform, economic policy, and other current topics? Why have they pressed one another to include the voices of laypeople prominently in their stories, voices unaffiliated with the world of state and national capitals, not officials, not business representatives, not political operatives, not academics well versed in the public policy concern of the week?

Why have judges, defense attorneys, prosecutors, and corrections administrators sought out citizen boards to hear some kinds of criminal offenses? Why have they decided to share some of their authority and include members of the lay public in discharging some of the responsibility of keeping the public safe and doing justice?

There is a fragmented but forceful reform movement in a number of socially and politically significant professions that deserves a good name. I call it "democratic professionalism" because bioethics, public journalism,

and restorative justice reformers are drawing new attention to the democratic significance of professional domains, such as hospitals and clinics, newspapers and television stations, courtrooms and corrections facilities, and to

Democratic professionals are fascinating bridge agents.

the fact that these are public places in which members of the public can share authority over tasks that affect them. Far from a deprofessionalization or antiinstitution movement, these reformers still value the specific, specialized knowledge of the seasoned journalist and editor, well-studied and practiced physician, and well-trained and experienced judge and attorney. As they try to be more democratic and help laypeople gain useful civic skills, they also seek to transform ossified conceptions of professionalism, but they are in no way antiprofessional.

The questions stated previously are political, ethical, and practical questions about the status of contemporary professionalism. From the perspective of political science and political theory, the democratic professionals in journalism, criminal justice, medicine, and elsewhere are fascinating bridge agents—people who can mediate between complex institutions and members of the lay public who lack hands-on knowledge of these institutions and the political issues related to them. Though professions, professionals, and ideals of professionalism are not presently studied by political scientists and political theorists, for reasons I will suggest shortly, they ought to be included prominently in the burgeoning research on civic engagement and public deliberation.

From the perspective of those generally interested in the ethics of professions, “democratic professionals” suggest a new way of approaching traditional questions about the specific social responsibilities of journalists, lawyers, doctors, and others—one that draws attention to the civic and democratic nature of these responsibilities. Reform-minded journalists, for example, write about the civic responsibilities of journalists to ensure greater accountability of elected officials to citizens. But they also claim a democratic responsibility to include citizens in dialogue about what, exactly, the social responsibilities of journalists are. This is an exciting shift in focus for professional ethics, I believe, that emphasizes the public justification of normative issues that are currently private and extremely academic.

From the perspective of professionals themselves, the new model of professionalism suggested by reformers is both challenging and rewarding. At a time when even traditional professions are losing ground in public opinion, democratic professionalism shows how to regain trust, respect, and perhaps even authority. By sharing in some of the experiences of



the journalist, physician, judge, or prosecutor, lay citizens come to recognize the complexity of these roles and better discern what good reporting, doctoring, or judging looks like. Yet sharing tasks and authority pose difficult trade-offs for democratic professionals, who now hold themselves to both professional and democratic standards of conduct.

The role of those with specialized knowledge in modern democracy has been an unresolved issue since public intellectuals began to confront it in the Progressive Era. Most recognized the necessity for specialists in applied sciences, such as engineering, and applied social sciences, such as economics, to be engaged in policy implementation, if not policymaking, in the wake of the massive economic and social changes of industrialization and urbanism. Intellectuals like John Dewey, Herbert Croly, and Walter Lippmann had come to question the modern relevance of old-fashioned ideals of face-to-face democracy—in Dewey’s words, the “local town-meeting practices and ideas” that still had a hold on the hearts of Progressives. Some proposed a new ideal of professionalism grounded in natural and social science methods and the special training needed to solve complex social and economic problems but also dedicated to public well-being and responsive to public opinion. As Woodrow Wilson wrote in his early contribution to this discussion, “The ideal for us is a civil service cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought, by means of elections and constant public counsel, as to find arbitrariness or class spirit quite out of the question.” Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann proposed that such a professionalized cadre of policy specialists and civil

servants, if removed somewhat from the democratic political process and allowed to take their cues from their professional training, experience, and fellow colleagues, would be uniquely capable of solving social problems

Sharing tasks and authority pose difficult trade-offs.

and making difficult policy choices in the best interests of the public, even if the public did not immediately recognize this. For Croly and Lippmann, as with Wilson before them, popular elections would ensure that these professionals and those who appointed them could be held accountable for their policy failures.

Other Progressive Era intellectuals like John Dewey, though sympathetic to the new ideal of public-spirited professionalism, worried considerably about the gulf separating these specialists and the rank-and-file citizens purportedly served by them. If the outcomes



of American democracy were determined by experts behind closed doors, then to what extent could the political processes open to laypeople, such as elections, really give voice to the collective interests of the public? The horn

The professions have been neglected in political theory.

of the dilemma facing Dewey, however, was the obvious problem, as he was quick to point out, that the American mass public was too “scattered, mobile, and manifold” to follow policy deliberations or even to determine what its public interests were in order to voice them to policymakers. Even policy deliberation on issues that directly affect citizens, such as public transportation, admitted Dewey, could hardly be done in public by the public given “the very size, heterogeneity, and mobility of urban populations” and “the technical character of the engineering problems” involved.



Dewey’s contribution to this debate was to conceptualize the democratic professional, the applied social scientist, the engineer, the teacher, and the reporter who worked *with* rather than *for* the public, who *facilitated* public understanding and practical abilities rather than *led* the public. Dewey’s thoughts on professionalism help us understand the significance of current reform movements and assess their strengths and weaknesses, but they are far from contemporary theories of professionalism and democracy.

The gap between professionalized politics in American democracy and a mass public that is only minimally participatory and only barely knowledgeable about public affairs and political institutions is perhaps even greater now than it was in the Progressive Era. As in that period, scholars and intellectuals are pressing for new conceptions of democracy that can bridge this gap. Unlike the Progressive Era, however, professions, professionals, and ideals of professionalism barely appear in contemporary discourse as key actors. In part, this is due to the negative connotations of professionalism in relation to democracy—elitism, technocracy, inequality, superior knowledge, hierarchy, meritocracy. More important as a reason for neglect, however, is a disciplinary ignorance of professions in political science.

The professions have been neglected in political theory with negative consequences for the field in general and for the development of democratic theory in particular. To see this, we do not have to fully agree with Talcott Parsons that the professional complex is the “crucial structural development in 20th-century society,” something he believed had displaced the state and the “capitalistic organization of the economy.” We need only recognize, as many Progressive Era intellectuals did, the

political implications of professional knowledge and practice.

The function, status, and authority of professional work have not been even minor topics in political theory. There is no doubt that political theorists have dealt with issues that overlap professional domains. Michel Foucault's treatments of disciplinary power and Jürgen Habermas's concern for instrumental rationality in the system world are two strong examples. However, political theorists have not analyzed the specificity—what Emile Durkheim would call the “moral particularism”—of professional activity in public life. They neglect to see professions as political agents separate from other powerful economic and political organizations, particularized in their functional and associational differences from each other (e.g., the political agency of law is different from medicine in part because of the different functional roles and the different organizational histories of the two professions), and as mediating between self, other, and group in ways that have both harmful and beneficial consequences for democracy.

Citizens have become bystanders to collective decisions.

Even though professional practices are marked by relations of power and authority and raise questions of proper representation and accountability,—all central concepts for political theorists—professional ethics has come to be seen as primarily the jurisdiction of philosophers rather than political theorists.

More generally, too, professional practices raise issues of power and authority relevant to democratic citizenship that have been



left largely untreated by philosophers of the professions.

Contemporary political theory has taken what some call a “deliberative turn.” Many scholars believe that features of contemporary politics, such as declining citizen participation, are signs of deep alienation from collective decision making. As citizens have become bystanders to collective decisions, they have become distanced from one another and have lost opportunities for advancing public goods. The distance between citizens reduces awareness of others' lives and lessens engagement in the social practices that would allow citizens to learn how others different from them in class, region, race, and gender are affected by collective decisions.

The solution for many scholars is public deliberation in which collective decisions are more closely tied to public forums marked by equality, active participation, and reasonableness. So far, students of public deliberation have largely ignored a crucial dimension of the intermediary realm between individual and state in which professions that possess the power to distract, encourage, limit, and inform democratic deliberation exist. Moreover, some of the most aggressive current efforts at fostering public deliberation are located in just

this intermediary realm. A closer relation between political theory and professions would allow professional ethics to catch up with the developments like those illustrated by our ini-

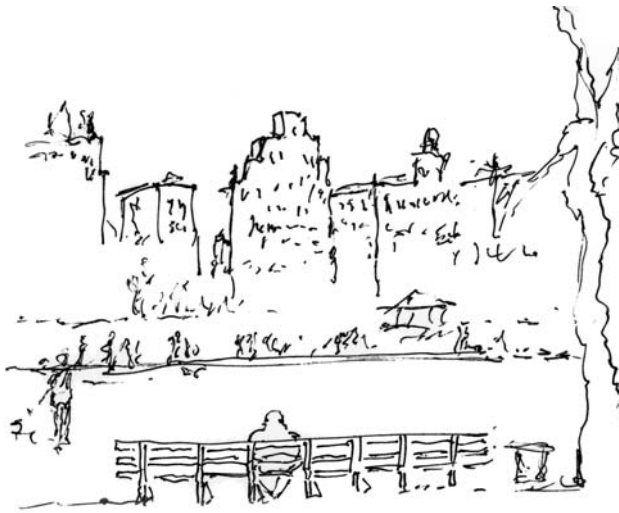
Professionalism has a civic dimension.

tial snapshots of increased lay participation in professional decisions and activities. Reform-minded professionals show a growing awareness of how the institutions and practices they so strongly influence—the hospitals and clinics, the newspapers and news stations, the court rooms and correctional facilities—can either exclude or engage lay members of the public and can either play a disempowering or empowering function in American democracy.

Rightly understood, professionalism has a civic dimension. Such civic roles both strengthen the legitimacy of professional

authority and render that authority more transparent and more vulnerable to public influence. Once it is understood that professionals can help mobilize and inform citizen participation inside and outside spheres of professional authority, many of the negative, counterdemocratic connotations of professionalism fall away. Indeed, rightly understood, democratic professionals are some of the best candidates today for bolstering the deliberative democracy urged by contemporary commentators. This is not to ask professionals to substitute political for occupational duties but rather to become aware of, as well as enlarge and enrich, the already existing connections between professional and democratic practice.

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