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Professionalization: the mystery of boundaries

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The notion of professionalization is widespread in all work environments, if not in society as a whole (Perkin, 1988), and this does not go without the risk of diluting its meaning. If everything becomes professional, if everything is professionalizing or—to use a neologism—“professionalizable”, then we can call into question the relevance of a concept which has become not only elastic or shapeless, but also unavoidable and omnipresent, when we wish to account for the transformations affecting métiers, production systems, market relations, and the world of training. By spreading rapidly over the last decades in various fields of study such as the sociology of organizations (Demazière and Péglise 2022), public action (Le Bianic and Vion 2008), administration and State (Bajard *et al.* 2018), political representatives (Michon and Ollion 2018) markets and customers (Dondeyne 2002) or education and training (Lang, 1999), the notion of professionalization has been summoned to address diverse issues. However, these point more or less towards a central question, which can be formulated in terms of the consistency of the professional fact. By this expression we must understand the modes and degrees of affirmation within organized (bureaucracies, markets, etc.) and regulated (by laws, quality standards, etc.) systems of workers practicing the same activity.

This perspective can be understood as the unfolding of the fundamental meaning of the concept of professionalization, as it circulates in its preferred field: the

sociology of professions. In fact, it designates the processes of emergence, constitution and institutionalization of social entities aggregated around the exercise of a particular professional activity with the goal of protecting it, controlling its regulation, promoting valorization, or even conquering its monopoly. In a certain way, professionalization tells the stories of boundaries, whether this involves identifying particular professional activities, or building forms of protection to perpetuate them, or even constructing regulations to make them stand out as different from others. It designates the delineation or demarcation of boundaries between professionals and non-professionals, between more or less delimited professional groups, protected by their boundaries to a larger or lesser extent. The central challenge of professionalization lies in this “more or less”, which qualifies the consistency, recognition, coalescence, identity, legitimacy of these groups, constituted around (more or less) specialized and identified activities in the division of labor.

It is this thread of boundaries that we will explore throughout the chapter, less to interrogate the delimitation of what a profession is than to provide information on what constitutes a profession: the very process of differentiation of work activities, their specialization, their affirmation, their recomposition. Whether we go through the analysis of work and concrete activities or we study political enterprises striving to conquer a professional territory, the goal is not to distinguish between categories of activities, but rather to inform the processes of professional categorization. How do activities emerge, how are they constituted, how do they differentiate themselves, how do they acquire recognition? How are boundaries asserted, moved, weakened, crossed, how do they disappear, etc.?

We will begin by showing that in its original sense the concept of professionalization is the operator making it possible to characterize the position of professional groups in relation to the status of profession (established, recognized), to index the distance to this reference figure along conditional criteria, and to establish a tendentially watertight boundary between *professions* and *occupations*, a differentiation used in English-speaking countries. Then, we examine a conception of professionalization (more open and less centered on the culmination of the process), which conceives it as a collective action invariably distributed and engaging multiple stakeholders, which leads to focusing on the dynamics of the boundaries of professional groups. Professionalization is then conceived as work at the boundaries of any professional group, rather than as a generator of the boundaries which differentiate certain professional groups along the status scale. We will conclude by emphasizing that all professional groups, regardless of their organization and recognition, face the same challenge of asserting a place in the division of labor and that professionalization is a key to analyzing the recomposition of occupational activities, provided that it is conceived both as a general and selective process.

2.1. Professionalization as the selection of professions

A first chain of significations conveyed by the concept of professionalization points to the debates on how *métiers* and professional groups are characterized and granted a theoretical status. Professionalization is defined as a pathway, punctuated by obstacles to overcome. It is organized into multiple stages, leading to the attainment of a specific status: the status of *profession* as understood in the English language, where it denotes an established or institutionalized profession, holding the statute as such. The collective entities associated with the exercise of occupational activities can follow a path towards professionalization, along which they are more or less advanced and count on more or less resources to overcome pitfalls. Considering that not all of them manage to complete this entire path, professionalization is therefore a selective process: it is defined here as the selection of *professions* among a larger set of activities (among other *occupations*, in the English language sense). It is a marker of distinction, delineating a boundary between professions and other activities which are not recognized as such.

This boundary has a double signification, which reminds us of the two modes of performativity boundaries have (Gottmann 1980), matching the metaphors of the “door” and the “bridge” (Simmel 1988). On the one hand, the boundary dissociates, divides, selects. It includes and excludes, and in that case corresponds to the figure of a line or a door. On the other hand, the boundary lets pass, connects, links. It promotes circulation and acts like a zone or a bridge. Through its procedural dimension, the concept of professionalization is associated with this second logic, as a possible flow or path across this bridge, whose crossing could grant the access to the status of a profession. But it also means that occupational activities are distributed among those who have passed to the other side, those who have crossed the door separating “real” professions and non-professions. Hence, we understand that this boundary is a major subject born with the emergence of the sub-field of sociology of work, whose specialization object is occupational activities and the division of labor into *métiers*, work specialties or expertise. In fact, it concentrates a series of debates on the way of designating the objects analyzed (professions or occupations, to use the two original categories, *métiers*, professional groups, expert work, etc.), the definition of the criteria for grounding such distinctions and the distribution of countless occupational activities on both sides of the boundary. It also gives rise to debates on the very relevance of the concept of boundary. We will first consider the question of professionalization as the access to a distinctive profession status. Following this, we will discuss the challenges related to drawing a demarcation line between certain professions and ordinary occupational activities. Finally, we will emphasize the risks of reducing professionalization to its outlets and of neglecting the processes as such (an issue which arose with the diversification of research fields).

2.1.1. Professionalization for all?

The concept of professionalization has established itself as an essential tool for analyzing the world of labor, its use being profuse and widespread (Demazière *et al.* 2012). While it concentrates the theoretical clashes between the classic trends in the sociology of professions from English-speaking countries (see the chapter by Florent Champy on this point), it has only recently spread in research on work and occupational activities in France. Notwithstanding this, it quickly became a concept dear to sociologists of work, as soon as they adopted the focus on métiers. It now runs through research devoted to the study of the most diverse occupational activities: physicians (Danet 2008), police officers (Pruvost 2007; Pichonnaz 2017), home helpers (Bonnet 2015), artistic intermediaries (Lizé and Naudier 2015), postmen (Salaün 2008), teachers (Guibert and Lazuech 2010), prison guards (Combessie 2009; Mallochet 2007), farmers (Nicolas 2018), etc, to mention only a few examples.

This work and many others have fueled questions about the identification of possible distinctive properties which could explain why certain activities—and only a few of them—have managed to obtain sufficient autonomy to organize and regulate their pursuits and their labor market. The original tension and classic debate between *profession* and *occupation*, or non-profession, were revived, put to the empirical test, discussed. By definition, the substantial results are variable, reflecting the diversity of the activities studied, located in contrasting positions in the scales of prestige, remuneration, expertise consecrated by training, collective organization, etc. On a theoretical level, this empirical work is diverse, but it is most often part of the interactionist pole in the sociology of professions. Due to the very variety of the objects and occupational activities studied, they—most often implicitly but no less clearly—break with the functionalist perspective according to which only a limited number of activities reunite the characteristics legitimizing access to the status of *profession* (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933; Parsons 1939). The discriminatory use of the term profession appears largely inadequate to the empirical realities studied. Also, and often in an explicit manner, the frames of reference are inspired in interactionist perspectives which relativize or call into question its very principle: the distinction between *professions* and *occupations* (Hughes 1952, 1958; Becker 1962).

The variety of fields explored quickly made the profession's model (understood in the English language sense), appear as too narrow a framework for organizing research, since this could not be restricted to the circle of canonical professions analyzed by the first sociologists of professions: mainly lawyers (Parsons 1952) and physicians (Merton 1957), which served as the basis for the functionalist modeling of the profession. We are aware of the low relevance of the distinction between *professions* and *occupations* in the French context, which is not only absent from

ordinary language practices but also rarely used in sociological research (Menger 2003). The conception of professionalization as boundaries—door or bridge, barrier or pathway—between these two statutory categories is strongly dependent on an American or British institutional and political context, of little relevance for the countries in continental Europe. It nonetheless constitutes a powerful and solid matrix, since it leads to questions on the demarcation of this boundary, and therefore, the extent of professionalization. In other words, professionalization cannot be generalized because if it were a path open to every occupational activity regardless of its characteristic features, then the notion would tend to dissolve and blur any differentiation between professional entities, even when these are obviously not equivalent. On the contrary, if professionalization were reserved for a small number of *métiers* which fulfill functions deserving to be elevated to the rank of profession, then it would necessarily be limited to a few professional spheres constituting an elite or a privileged stratum in the productive system. These two polarized positions—the dynamic can be tightly restricted or potentially generalized—lead to a dilution of the fundamental signification of the concept, and of its analytical usefulness: a dynamic for producing differentiations and hierarchies, for manufacturing distinctions and orders within the social division of labor.

The question of opening the access to professionalization—and therefore, to the at least theoretical possibility for any professional entity to follow a path towards professionalization—resonates with the empirical observations made over half a century ago by Wilensky (1964) when he noticed that a growing number of *métiers* and activities were trying to consolidate their statutory position, to gain legal protection, to control their work environment, in short, to professionalize themselves. In his functionalist conception, this meant standing out from the mass of occupations in order to acquire the elitist status of a profession. But the reasoning can be substantially softened, stating that an increasing number of professional groups seek to improve their position in the division of labor, by accumulating the most diverse forms of recognition. For example, school heads sought to appropriate the managerial shift introduced vertically by the French National Education to gain room for maneuver in the management of their establishments, strengthen hierarchical power, negotiate an improvement in their remuneration, and differentiate themselves from the teaching profession through more diversified recruitment (Pélage 2011; Barrère 2013). Likewise, the mediators responsible for managing family disputes prior to the intervention of lawyers emphasized the complexity of the relational skills required to conduct their activity and thus accumulate professional legitimacy and free themselves from established and more prestigious legal professions (Milburn 2002). Let us mention another professional sphere, that of nursing assistants: located in an intermediate position in the organization of paramedical work at the hospital, they take on the irksome tasks delegated to them by the nurses in order to enrich their own

set of tasks, acquire a more honorable and rewarding role, and in certain cases, demand an increasing share of the work over the patients' bodies (Arborio 2012). Examples abound, such as that of magnetizers, traditionally subject to symbolic disqualifications because they base their practices on criticism of the superiority of scholarly knowledge over ancestral and analogical knowledge, but nonetheless manage to gain legitimacy by certifying their professional practices and paying taxes over the market relationships they are subject to (Charasse 2022).

The case of magnetizers leads to the limits of the field of sociology of professions, at least as it has been historically constituted, as they appear so distant from the ideas of *métier*, professional group, profession. However, like physicians, they carry out a consulting activity, relying on specific and esoteric skills (even if these are not integrated into a body of scientific knowledge). The service they offer has constitutive effectiveness and is the subject of a commercial exchange. In the same vein, we can take the example of prostitutes, a borderline case if there ever was one since trading one's body, or selling paid sexual services, is generally categorized, independently of moral considerations, as an activity far removed from what we usually mean by work, and foreign to the world of professional groups. Prostitution-related activities are commonly stigmatized, accused of illegitimacy, subject to disapproval, considered deviant and sometimes illegal. But moral and legal orders do not hinder them from being considered a professional activity, because apart from the fact of being remunerated, they involve a specific professional socialization, as all *métiers* do. Certainly, the absence of training premises does not translate a lack of abilities, because experience leads to the acquisition of ample know-how: adjusting the distance with customers, anticipating their reactions, identifying those who present a potential danger, earning respect, preserving safety, in short, mastering relational skills. Beyond that, these activity requirements are reflected in the discourses of prostitutes. Among those who vindicate prostitution as a *métier* (Pryen 1999), there is a distinction between the "professionals" who have acquired this know-how and those lacking said control, which are often included under other categories, such as "drug addicts". These positions, which reflect internal competition phenomena, are also attempts at regulation, through the affirmation of a legitimate conception of the activity. At least in certain repressive circumstances, they can also lead to collective mobilizations for the activity to be recognized (Mathieu 2015) and considered equal to any other, as well as to have it regulated by labor law, a stepping stone towards professionalization.

This extension of the domain of professionalization corresponds to the starting point of Wilensky's argument, even if according to this author, many activities claiming statutory elevation do not meet the distinctive properties characteristic of professions: non-limiting exercise but pursued on a full-time basis, the existence of

specialized training, the constitution of a body of rules organizing work, the founding of professional organizations, the formalization of a code of ethics and obtaining of an exercise monopoly. After all, this is his response to the central question he formulated himself: can everyone become a professional? By following his steps into the question but not in his way of solving it, we can remember that professionalization is an extensive social dynamic, which meets the aspirations of workers carrying out the most diversified activities and, in that sense, is potentially general. The field of education illustrates this wonderfully, due to the variety of actors who contribute to educational work and seek to be recognized: the different traditional teaching métiers involve teachers, heads of establishment, inspectors, but also non-teaching staff who are increasingly diversified (Van Zanten, 2001) and strive to find a place in the division of labor (Bois and Jacquot, 2022), or even parents themselves, some of whom, particularly in the middle classes, claim their share of educational work (Ball and Vincent, 2006). This generalization concerns professionalization as a process, not as an end result. It means that any group of workers identifying themselves with any activity or mastering a specific expertise are possibly engaged in a professionalization dynamic; in other words, this notion has a sufficiently positive connotation to function as a broad attractor. But in no way does this imply that the goal has been achieved and the aspirations satisfied, because the professionalization dynamic necessarily diffracts into unequal results and consequences.

The success of the theme of professionalization in the analysis of various activities does not lead to the identification of a global movement multiplying the number of métiers and other specialized activities, which would be increasingly valued one after the other. If researchers cherish the concept of professionalization, it is not only because they attach their questions to it, but mainly because it implies a form of valorization in itself: to turn into a professional has become an attractive goal in itself, even an obvious one, against which it is difficult to stand up... In the end, who would not wish to reach it, who would call into question such an undoubtedly desirable goal? We understand the interest of workers from all métiers in improving their status: autonomy in the definition and performance of their tasks, mastering the training conditions of the métier as well as the access rules to it, symbolic and material remuneration, recognition of consecrated expertise, etc. But this dynamic has heterogeneous translations, sometimes leading to explicit demands or negotiations with public authorities, sometimes remaining at the state of latent aspirations. On the other hand, professionalization does not lead to a leveling of activities and métiers but, as diffuse as it may be, it generates inequalities. This is why the question of the partition between the categories of professional entities—namely between professions and non-professions—deserves to be further examined.

2.1.2. Is there a professions perimeter?

The emergence of the field of sociology of professions, in England in the 1930s and then in the United States, is inseparable from the identification of a specific object—professions—and a vision of modern societies in which these professions take on a central regulatory role by constituting an ethical and responsible alternative to the business world: “Professions involve specialized intellectual technique, acquired through prolonged and formalized training, making it possible to provide effective service to the community” (Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933, p. 284). From the very beginning this conception, which emphasizes professional ethics, a sense of service and scientific knowledge (Chapoulie 1973), leads to Malthusianism: all professional communities cannot be professions, because their eminent role is indexed to selective conditions. Delineating the perimeter of professions is therefore an original challenge. The introduction of the concept of professionalization translates this by showing that the list is not closed, that the perimeter is not watertight.

In view of the distinction inherited from the sociology of English-speaking countries, *professions* are *occupations* which have managed to organize themselves to conquer exclusivity on the delivery of certain services, to control the methods for acquiring expertise, to define good working practices, to gain autonomy in relation to the market and the State, to resist the rationalizing forces encouraged by organizations and to establish themselves as an economically efficient and morally desirable mode of regulation. They rely on their own professional organizations—orders, associations, unions—to build and consolidate their monopoly, their ethics and their ideal of service and to negotiate with public authorities for autonomy in the management of their professional territory, which they administer as a professional community (Goode 1957). This autonomy is a major resource for recognized professions (notably for the consulting professions which have long provided the main areas of sociological inquiry). They can assert the legitimacy of their expertise towards customers and users, and all the more so, when such expertise is associated with work on inference and practical wisdom (Champy 2009).

The late introduction of the sociology of professions in France after the 1990s quite logically highlighted debates on the perimeter of professions. The narratives in this field of research (Dubar and Tripier, 1998; Champy 2009; Vézinat 2016) stage the fight between various schools of thought, in particular, the initial confrontation between functionalists and interactionists, and other alternatives. There is an obvious and precious educational value in this delimitation of the research field, revealing the importance of debates on professionalization understood as the differentiation and hierarchy of professional groups, in terms of recognition, autonomy, and legitimacy. Still, the power of theoretical emulation of these descriptions is controversial, because the study of professional work in France has barely been structured around such debates. This is not to say that they were totally absent though, and the introductions

to the history of the field have not been done in vain. The fact remains that the functionalist trend is little present in France, where it has been criticized (and even devalued), for its canonical conception of the profession, adhering to conditionality criteria, and struggling to give a clear status to professional rhetoric, which could end up being perceived as an endogenous attempt to legitimize successful professionalization, consecrated by a superior status. Conversely, and despite not being established as a paradigm of analysis, the interactionist trend has also found significant echo. Although some of its basic concepts (such as license, mandate, segmentation, negotiated order) are frequently used, this trend risks disqualifying the legal codification of professions *de facto*, while ignoring statutory inequalities not necessarily visible at the workplaces where it concentrates its analyses. We should also add that most of the time, the works quoted in support of a surpassing synthesis (such as those of Johnson, Larson, Abbott, Freidson) are classified under a third group which is so heterogeneous that its formation is not justified, other than to strengthen the supposedly structuring character of the principled opposition between functionalism and interactionism.

The interest in professions was sparked by a handful of works focusing on the dynamics of professionalization. They implicitly criticized the clear demarcation of a perimeter of professions, and emphasized the plural and uncertain characteristics of the structuring of occupational activities (Tréanton 1960; Maurice 1972; Chapoulie 1973). But the debate was quickly closed, so much did it rely on categories foreign to the French sociology of the time. The analyses of social groups and occupational activities was organized around other categories, such as social classes, unions, métiers, or socio-professional categories (Lallement 2007). And in the 1990s the development of the sociology of professions was not based on the delimitation of a specific object, such as a set of activities with such distinctive traits that they could be labeled as professions. Truth be told, the English language distinction between *professions* and *occupations* arouses empirical criticism, to such extent that the notion of profession has to be used cautiously. French sociologists often add a qualifier (established, liberal, organized, learned, accomplished profession, etc.), or use other terms, such as professional groups (Demazière and Gadéa 2009). The research field of the sociology of professions was not built on the basis of a differentiation—not even a hypothetical one—between certain activities which could be considered as professions, and others receiving a more common status. Opposing this differentiating perspective, it developed from fieldwork covering a large number of diverse activities. For example, in the contents summary of a first work aiming to structure this field of research in France, (Lucas and Dubar 1994) we find a wide variety of “professional groups”: physicians, customs officers, supermarket cashiers, engineers, nurses, teachers, drivers, train operators, consultants, farmers, trainers, etc. The comparison of these case studies stresses the non-linear and non-univocal character of

professionalization processes, which cannot, according to the coordinators, be reduced to an entry into the closed world of professions, but should rather be contemplated as a heterogeneous transformation in the recognition and valorization professional groups benefit from.

This conceptualization marks a step aside from the logic demarcating the perimeter of professions. This gap is not only based on the broadening and diversification of fields, but also on the primacy given to research—and to the most varied fieldwork—fostering empirical situations which deviate from the canonical or ideal-typical definition of a profession. A few examples from the above-mentioned activities will help to illustrate this. Farmers claim to work for the common good, by feeding the population and maintaining rural areas. Although they have powerful professional organizations, they do not rely on the esoteric knowledge they monopolize and often appear as dependent large chemical firms (Joly 2001; Nicolas 2018). Nurses master specific expertise acquired in specialized schools, respecting a professional code of ethics. However, they are dominated by physicians delegate the most irksome tasks to them, they are dependent on hospital bureaucratic organizations and have reduced autonomy in the exercise of their duties (Béghin-Do 2015; Douguet and Vilbrod 2018). Train drivers have an activity governed by numerous specific rules they do not enact because they result from regulations defined at higher levels. While their expertise guarantees traveler safety, they struggle to translate this goal into an ideal of service (Houriez 1994). Customs officers work for the community by positioning themselves as guarantors of fundamental collective rules and by fighting against fraud and crime. Nevertheless, their subordinate position in bureaucracies reflects the weight of the requirements to conduct their activity, even if part of it remains discretionary (Jacob 1995; Duprez 2000). The heterogeneity of the areas investigated, and the extent of deviations from the profession's ideal type in the situations studied keep us quite apart from the reasoning inherited from the tradition in English-speaking countries. The analysis of professionalization carves out its own path, far from the identification of salient, if not essential, features defining professions ("real" professions, we might even say). Such analysis would be sterile or at least draining, since it would inevitably conclude with the shortcomings or incompleteness of professionalization, reducing the *métier* studied to the state of a semi-profession, a quasi-profession, a proto-profession, or why not a sub-profession, a quarter-profession, etc.

The conception of professionalization as the culmination of a differentiation process between two categories of entities— professions and non-professions—also comes up against both theoretical and practical difficulties, identified as early as the 1970s. The first relates to the formal definition of the boundary and the criteria used for delineating it. Even if Wilensky's proposals are the most widely disseminated,

they are not the only ones. For example, four attributes of professions were also proposed around those times: specialized knowledge; a primary orientation to community interest rather than the profession's interest; a code of ethics; a sense of an accomplished work (a quality concern) (Barber 1963). But other characteristics were rejected because they were considered too widespread and insufficiently discriminating: corporate solidarity, specific socialization, a lifestyle. We therefore understand that the identification of criteria enabling us to discern professionalization processes is a task with no end in sight (Jackson 1970) and one that has long been subject to debate (Greenwood 1957). The second difficulty lies in the relationship between the point of arrival and the process: how to measure and qualify the degree of accomplishment, knowing that it can be assessed in terms of distance traveled (and to be covered) and modulations depending on the chosen criteria. Here, the introduction of degrees of monopoly, external recognition, internal organization, knowledge esotericism (Turner and Hodge 1970), does not fundamentally change things, except that it turns boundaries into a vast intermediate area welcoming semi-professions (neither full professions nor occupations).

This invites the question on the need to draw a partition, regardless of the boundary's thickness, comprising the whole of occupational activities. Symmetrically, we can recognize the theoretical and empirical usefulness of not considering occupational activities in an indistinct manner. In order to describe, one has to classify, differentiate, organize. But criteriology (combining criteria to delimit a boundary) does not seem the right method to do so. The boundary is neither that of the ideal type (which measures differences between a standard and empirical cases), nor that of generalized equivalence, because the division of labor proceeds not only by differentiation, but also by hierarchization. The challenge lies in placing the culmination of professionalization at a distance, something which has been favored by the enrichment of the empirical bases and the affirmation of the concept of professional group.

2.1.3. At a distance from the arrival point: professional groups

The vitality of the field of study of professional groups in France quickly revealed the profession's model (in the English language sense) as too narrow a framework to grasp the process of division of labor, the differentiation of occupational activities and professionalization. Because according to this model, professions claim a monopoly of exercise, which they defend by controlling the content of the skills vindicated, the transmission of knowledge and the socialization of members, the ethical rules governing their implementation, the social and economic value of their activity. The profession is a concept whose field of application is relatively narrow and targeted, where lawyers and physicians also occupy a prominent place (Dingwall and Lewis

1983; Dingwall 2008). And even keeping a distance from these emblematic figures, the concept applies to workers holding a high level of expertise, benefiting from great autonomy in the accomplishment of their tasks, forming a sort of professional elite at the top of the prestige or remuneration scale (Leichtet and Fennel 2001).

The introduction of the term “professional group” has made it possible to take into account various activities and métiers bottom-down of the social hierarchy, acknowledging varying degrees of organization or protection of the labor market (Chapoulie 1973). This paved the way for the renewal of theoretical questions. Instead of being considered as closed, protected and codified groups, professional groups were tackled as problematic entities: bringing together workers carrying out an activity with the same name, but whose social visibility, recognition and legitimacy were not assured, and whose internal cohesion, organization and strength were not established (Dubar and Tripier 1998). This perspective also resonates at the international level, where new expressions have emerged, such as *professional groups* or *occupational groups*, and more recently *professional occupations* (Evetts 2003, 2004).

Since then, the empirical expansion has been uninterrupted, to the point that it has become impossible to draw up a reasoned, if not exhaustive, inventory of the areas in which professional dynamics are studied. To fairly traditional fields, such as health (general practitioners, surgeons, nurses, psychotherapists, physiotherapists, but also pain physicians, acupuncturists or homeopaths), law (lawyers, magistrates, industrial tribunal judges, prosecutors, but also legal mediators, bailiffs, clerks), or the so-called liberal professions (accountants, notaries, bailiffs, auctioneers, insurance brokers), or education (secondary school teachers, primary school teachers, school heads, adult trainers, educational advisors, educational assistants for teachers), or even social work (social workers, child-minders, marital counselors, specialized educators, or even family aides, social mediators), are added diverse activities, such as the arts (theater actors, classical orchestra musicians, baroque musicians, jazzmen, circus artists or even art restorers), services to the individual (salespeople, delivery drivers, postal workers, teleoperators, bank advisors, postmen, funeral advisors or even online brokers), intellectual activities (journalists, urban planners, advertising creatives, industrial designers or even headhunters), small traditional métiers (fishermen, janitors, industrial workers, bakers or even dockers), public administration agents (police officers, professional advisors, pension fund liquidators, labor inspectors, tax agents, or even immigration clerks), atypical forms of activity (volunteer association leaders, locally appointed officials, high-level athletes, prostitutes, public writers, free software developers or even newspaper hawkers), etc.

The accumulation of empirical and monographic research focusing on diverse occupational activities has shown the way in which the mastery, control and work configuration challenges appear in an almost universal manner across all professional spheres and for all categories of workers. All of them face challenges in responsibility delimitation, knowledge recomposition, batch tasks modulation, collective strategies reorientation, in short, adjustments of their position in the division of labor. Therefore, doesn't the challenge come down to strengthening one's position and accumulating resources until becoming a profession? A theoretical question thus resurfaces, together with the concept of professionalization: how to envision the processes, developments and changes theorized under the term "professionalization"? Do they adopt specific pathways for each occupational activity? Are they oriented towards a common direction, corresponding to professional stabilization or institutionalization? Can they be indexed to a degree measuring fulfillment or accomplishment? These questions point to a cumbersome paradox: the recourse to the notion of professionalization brings to the surface problems we used to associate with the notion of profession, and which we expected to solve just by adopting other categories of analysis. As a matter of fact, is the horizon of professionalization the formation of a professional group and the structuring of a profession? To what extent does the concept of professionalization provide a theoretical continuity enabling us to grasp degrees of advancement along a "normal" pathway, and in this case, what constitutes its real added value? On the contrary, to what extent do they correspond to a theoretical breakup, and that case, what can be its significance other than the empowerment of a professional group and the recognition of a profession?

This points to a major difficulty in reasoning in terms of professionalization, to the risk of reducing the process to the outcome. The analysis in terms of processes has the advantage of breaking with static perspectives. However, implicitly or not, it risks modeling temporality in a historical sense, evolution in a given direction, progression graded in stages. Professionalization appears as a step forward, and sociologists risk having their activity reduced to the measurement of the progress covered, even if this means affirming the critical dimension of their point of view by showing that the actors concerned have over or under-evaluated progress along this path. Undoubtedly, the large-scale comparison and continuous empirical expansion have made it possible to harness this risk by emphasizing the heterogeneity of professional dynamics, resisting an interpretation in terms of fulfillment more or less conforming to a unique (professional) model, expressing multiple processes, a proliferation of logics not obeying any general norm. The notion of professionalization then serves to explore diversified, ambiguous and contradictory transformational movements professional activities undergo: emergence, identification, delimitation, categorization, legitimation, invalidation, erosion, segmentation, destruction and disappearance.

This extension of professionalization paths is interdependent with the conceptualization of the entities concerned by such processes: since these are potentially heterogeneous and fragmented, these entities are social forms which are themselves plural. This is how the very concept of professional group emerged for designating groups of workers who perform an identified activity bearing a specific name, and consequently, occupying a recognized place in the division of labor and benefiting from certain legitimacy, without introducing any hypothesis implying degrees of professionalization. Furthermore, these professional groups can be understood as fuzzy sets, subject to continuous changes in their activity and characterized by evolving contours. This perspective leads to placing the challenges of boundary delimitation at the center of professionalization analysis: not those which would separate professions from non-professions, but those identifying and delimiting the professional groups themselves.

2.2. Professionalization as friction at the boundaries

In a second analytical line, the culmination of professionalization processes does not appear at the center of attention, because it is not a question of separating categories of professional groups and observing if and how they reached the status of a profession. This statutory difference is placed in the background. It does not mean that it is being denied, but rather that the core of the analysis concerns the processes themselves. We could wonder about the interest of this position: why study a process while neglecting its point of arrival, its end result? The answer lies in the consequences of this theoretical choice—radical with regard to the tradition of professions analysis—on the conceptualization of professionalization processes. To consider that they have no culmination point amounts to breaking with the reasoning which conceives them as progression—or regression in certain cases—along a unidirectional path, based on indices and criteria measuring how these conditions are satisfied. This also comes down to conceiving professionalization as an ever unfinished and multidirectional process, expressed differently in a variety of professional spheres. It envisions it less as an internal dynamic of groups considered as entrepreneurs more or less effectively taking the reins of their own professionalization, than as a system of social relations whose alliances and conflicts delineate heterogeneous pathways and whose sequences are not based on a statutory progression vector.

While professionalization has been classically conceived as the production of boundaries between categories of professional groups, it is conceptualized here as work at the boundaries of groups, leading less to the accumulation of resources to improve their status than to the reconfiguration of groups, modifying their contours and characteristics. It is a more of a vector displacing boundaries between groups,

rather than groups crossing a stabilized boundary. First, we will emphasize that all professional groups are surrounded, if not pinned down, by multiple actors claiming to influence their professionalization, and therefore causing tensions at their boundaries. Then, we will argue that even if wage labor (largely dominant), is the Achilles tendon of professionalization because it increases the permeability of professional groups to external influences, it does not necessarily signify deprofessionalization. Finally, drawing on the proposals of Andrew Abbott, who gives primacy to boundaries over professional entities, we will argue that every professional group constitutes professionalization.

2.2.1. Tensions around professionalization

Professionalization appears as a desirable goal, generally endowed with positive values, invested by workers who see it as a way of valorizing their activity. It also seems attractive to other stakeholders, such as recipients or regulators of the activity, who see it a lever for the production of professional and qualitative work, stable and predictable. But the picture is not so irenic, because while professionalization seemingly achieves consensus, it does so at the cost of a number of ambiguities and misunderstandings. Less than a circulating asset with the virtue of satisfying the convergent expectations of tradespeople, of customers hiring them, of the authorities organizing economic activities, professionalization can be considered as a floating signifier, onto which each category of actors invests different meanings. This cannot be apprehended without taking into account the multiplicity of actors who gravitate around the boundaries of professional groups. The place of the latter—and even of *professions*—within societies is always caught in relationships of power, competition, struggle, negotiation, as stressed by the successive points of view adopted by Freidson on control by (the) professionals (Freidson 1986, 1994, 2001). For each stakeholder professionalization is a space for projections and demands which, far from converging, often tend to collide. Because it expresses claims to define labor, and not only that, but also what professionals must or should look like.

The strength and multiplicity of tensions affecting the definition of the missions of professional groups is a general phenomenon, more the rule than the exception. We can illustrate this through the example of three contrasting professional groups, not only by the positions they occupy in the division of labor but also by their degree of coalescence: physicians who have long been considered (Carr Saunders and Wilson 1933) as a typical case of an established profession and the subject of an impressive and probably unequaled amount of research (Bergeron and Castel 2018); teachers who, without being established as a recognized profession, benefit from a license and a mandate (Hughes 1958) as well as a large degree of autonomy in the practice of their *métier*, and have been studied in a regular and long-standing manner (Lieberman

1956; Dorros 1968; Geer 1968; Leggat 1970; Hoyle 1983, etc.); finally, building concierges, who are at the bottom of the professionalization scale in the sense explained in the first part of this text, occupy a poorly valued place in the division of labor, and have aroused interest of a far more limited number of researchers (Bronner and Stébé 2001; Villanova and Bonnin 2006; Marchal 2006, 2007), with the exception of historical works.

What is a “good” doctor? The answers vary depending on the positions occupied in relation to this activity: whether one is a doctor, a patient, a nurse, a hospital manager, the member of the patient’s family, etc. The quality of a “good” doctor, of a “good” professional, gets caught up in a process of adjustment/misadjustment between competing—but not necessarily contradictory—claims to state what labor is, what it should be, and what its purpose could be. What is a “good” teacher? The teachers who perform this activity obviously have an answer to this question, as do the students, their parents, the school management, ministerial authorities, designers and publishers of school textbooks, pedagogues and didacticians, inspectors, teachers’ unions, etc. Each point of view is indexed to a specific position in the world of education, and associated with particular standards. What is a “good” building concierge? Certainly those who occupy these functions have an answer to this question, which they try to implement on a daily basis, but the direct recipients of their activity also have an answer, namely the residents and the owners or operators of the buildings, as well as other categories of workers whose activity has points of contact with that of caretakers, such as road workers, cleaners collecting household waste, gardeners maintaining green spaces around buildings, local traders, etc.

At the level of spaces and working premises, where occupational activities are effectively carried out, professionalization is omnipresent, at least in discourse and vindication/attribution actions. Not only do these acts contribute to configuring the daily lives of the workers concerned, but they also have an influence at a more global level on the definition of their mandate, on the missions of the professional group, on the regulation of their activity, in short, on professionalization. As a consequence, professionalization dynamics should not be interpreted in terms of increasing autonomy in the categories of workers, nor as a growing affirmation of expertise or of professional groups. To be sure, they indicate that they are constantly confronted with other groups (of the most diverse nature), who also have an interest in conducting and defining what they do and who they are.

If we return to the case of physicians, it has been amply shown that they share the appreciation, as the definition, of their work with other actors: the implementation of health care protocols often requires the active cooperation of patients the success of medical work depends on. Patients also intervene in a more direct manner every time

they require adjustments, make claims, or even file complaints. Caregivers also have an active role, when they invest in the relational dimension of medical work, often delegated for considering it dirty work. Hospital managers play a non-negligible role through resource allocation (or their reduction). Bureaucratic supervision can also exert increasing control through the automated feedback of medical procedures; public authorities can activate multiple regulatory levers, relating to the demographics of the professional group (through *numerus clausus* policies), remuneration (through pricing or even wages), assignments (including in the liberal profession model), etc. Even if they epitomize a recognized profession and as such benefit from large autonomy in the administration of their professional territory, physicians do not constitute a sovereign entity, but they must deal with other actors, are confronted with attacks or protests, are forced to negotiate compromises and must defend their position which would otherwise be eroded. In this sense, the relationship of physicians with a wide variety of entities without whom their mission could not be fulfilled and holding a position which is constantly at stake constitute a privileged point of observation to account for the trajectory of professional groups, and to show the avatars of professionalization. The inventory of these relevant groups is always an unfinished task, so much does it depend on the events which sculpt the professionalization process. Without hesitation, we could add those actors who exert therapeutic practices not recognized as medical, not even under the label of alternative medicine (in France homeopathy, osteopathy, acupuncture and biorevitalization), and relegated to the margins or even to the field of magical practices (Chinese medicine, hypnosis, brain coaching, etc.), but who claim their expertise competes with recognized medicine, and therefore tend to threaten physicians by reducing their professional territory or by breaking into it to expand its perimeter, in both cases challenging its boundaries.

A similar reasoning can be applied to teachers. While this group is protected by a set of barriers to entry (such as expertise certified by training, or success in contests organized by public authorities), it is also the subject of interventions external to said professional group. This may just as well contribute to modifying their contours or influence the way in which they fulfill their missions. These missions are carried out in interaction with the students, who through their (more or less cooperative or disruptive) attitudes can influence the course of the activity and more broadly, the definition of teaching work, degrading it—if we follow the internal point of view—by imposing the need for discipline, for example. Other actors (such as inspectors and increasingly school heads who assess labor), also have a direct influence, by providing recommendations to teachers, and promoting or disqualifying such or such teaching modality *via* the direct link between their evaluations and career development. We could also mention the parents of students who, while not forming a unified actor, share their opinions on a variety of scenarios, claiming to know how educators should behave (in the direct interactions with teachers, school boards where they are

represented, in the public sphere through their federations). Teachers work under a wage regime—in or outside the civil service— and do not master the definition of their recruitment conditions, the groundings of the assessment of their activity, the progress of their careers, even if co-management with unions have long attenuated this phenomenon. Therefore, it is not only the autonomy which has long been recognized to them in their classes and in the sites where they work that can be contested. Beyond their license, it is also their mandate which can be contradicted and weakened, for example by the development of *home-schooling* practices—whereby parents would replace teachers—or by the offer of complementary services to teaching which supposedly help students overcome limitations in the form of supplementary courses (even if it is partly the same teachers who provide them in a different setting, or when this task is entrusted to people who do not meet the required qualifications). Again, the boundaries of the professional group can be disputed, or discreetly displaced, to such extent that professionalization can be found at the margins of the group, in the relationships they establish with external actors on different scenarios.

Similar observations can be made about building concierges who, for their part, carry out an activity considered subordinate and who have not formed a collective organization capable of defending their interests and their conception of their work. This appears quite elastic and vulnerable to the intervention of external actors. In quantity as in quality, it receives the impact from residents who can cause damage and thereby deny or destroy it, or on the contrary, through their careful behavior, can contribute to the maintenance or cleanliness of the premises and acknowledge the concierge's role. The conditions under which they carry out their missions are also dependent on the resources allocated by the managers of trustees or real estate companies who hire concierges (as employees or service providers). The contours of their activity can also be the subject of negotiations with other professionals working within the same premises, initiating games of delegation of irksome tasks and the defense of prerogatives, particularly around cleanliness and waste management. Employers or public authorities also make attempts to redefine the *métier*, for example, by seeking to add social mediation missions, especially in so-called difficult neighborhoods, giving rise to more or less effective resistance strategies which oppose a purer conception of the *métier*. Building concierges are also engaged in continuous professionalization, enriched by a multiplicity of actors who intend to contribute to defining the *métier*'s contours. The weak institutionalization of this professional group gives it few collective resources to influence these relationships, even if it is not completely helpless, since it can rely on collective agreements which provide the job descriptions or are inspired in the (imaginary?) solid foundations of a *métier* long rooted in history.

In this regard, each professional group finds itself in a unique situation: the range of actors who can modify the course of their activity and displace the boundaries of their professional territory is each time specific, as is the weight of the group in relation to these stakeholders. The inequalities are glaring here because the capacity for professionals to impose their own ways of defining their place in the division of labor and of fulfilling their role is tremendously variable. But the most prestigious, organized and recognized professions are not necessarily those which manage to escape the influence of the actors who gravitate around their boundaries. This is what the three examples described suggest.

Throughout the development of the sociology of professions the medical profession is considered as an emblematic example—and without doubt, the major example—of successful professionalization. Barely had the functionalist trend pushed this line of analysis to the furthest, than it came across the obvious limitations posed by the actual conditions of medical work, without nonetheless reducing it from the “institutional structure” it is inscribed in (Parsons 1955). Because these working conditions cannot be reduced to the singular consultation with each patient as in the private doctor model, where the practitioner is supposed to legitimately judge on the merits of the medical decision, from diagnosis to treatment (Freidson 1970; Penne 2010). Even in that context, the therapeutic relationship cannot be assimilated to a relationship of domination, asymmetrical as it may be (Boltanski 1971). Above all, the practitioner’s autonomy can be significantly limited, or contested by patients, and all the more so when cure is unattainable: in the case of chronic illnesses the doctor-patient relationship is part of a “negotiated order” (Strauss, 1978), as patients can take an active part in treatment decisions and somewhat become specialists in their illness, or at least in the ways of handling it (Baszanger 1986). In addition, the singular consultation, which tends to be inscribed in a contractual model (Zusman 1997), is too narrow a framework to seize medical work when this is inserted in hospital bureaucracies, which act as a source of a second line of authority, that of the manager (Freidson 1984; Vassy 2000), or makes the physician’s work inter-dependent with that of other professionals (Hall 1946; Herzlich 1973; Castel 2005). The conditions for implementing medical expertise are inseparable from a network of patients, parents, techniques and objects (Eyal 2013), to such extent that it can be considered as a network attribute, not only of professionals.

In contrast, concierges occupy a marginal place in the studies on sociology of work. While they do not benefit from a professional status, they even appear to lack the capacity to organize themselves to claim it. Their professionalization, in the sense of proximity to the autonomous profession model, is minimal or even non-existent. On the other hand, they experience multiple frictions at the boundaries of their professional territory. This, together with their place in the division of labor and the

array of tasks assigned to them, are stabilized, but they are also subject to various movements propelled by their employers, their hierarchies, the recipients of their activity. However, this does not *ipso facto* deprive them from the ability to gain margins of autonomy for fulfilling their tasks, to cooperate with residents or professionals working in contiguous territories to adjust their activity, to reduce it or adjust it. The configurations may be conspicuously variable: some may favor their autonomy while others may constrain it, increasing or reducing the porosity of boundaries in their professional territory. As for teachers, they find themselves in an intermediate state of professionalization in the classic sense. While their profession does not benefit from the privileges equivalent to that of physicians, they do master specialized and scholarly knowledge, establishing a relational asymmetry with the recipients of their activity once their expertise has been recognized. This legitimizes their autonomy in the exercise of said activity, clearly identifiable in their working conditions, in the principle crowning them as the masters of their classroom, or even in the eminence of collegiality to regulate a wide set of aspects regarding their practice. But in no way do these protections prevent protests, both at the workplace and beyond, at the scale of a global society where educators are contested and criticized, and exposed to emerging forms of competition. As such, professionalization appears as an uninterrupted and uncertain movement.

2.2.2. The risks of deprofessionalization?

If professionalization is not a unidirectional movement, and *a fortiori* a cumulative one, how should we envisage the temporal forms it adopts: is it erratic, unpredictable and versatile; how can we account for the directions it takes, with its twists and detours, regressions and throwbacks? The argument of regression, or deprofessionalization, seems insufficient or simplistic, because it implicitly conveys a linear conception of professionalization, as an evolution featuring gains or losses, progress, immobility or setbacks. These movements can be considered in a more open way, as a set of displacements which are difficult to forecast, since they are the fruit of tensions at the boundaries of professional groups.

In multiple fields of activity, professional groups are part of a world of labor where their place, role and attributes are put to the test by changes of all kinds, bringing weakening, strengthening, adaptation, in short, recompositions which do not only concern their autonomy for conducting their activity, but also engage their collective identity, their cohesion, their contours. For instance, the group of museum curators (Hénaut and Poulard 2018a, 2018b) is crossed by multiple dividing lines: their employment status (some being employees and others independent), the size and identity of the organizations where they work (national or territorial museums), the missions assigned to museums (contemporary art, eco-museums, etc.). These

cleavages also affect their missions and relationships with clienteles (the emphasis being placed on the exhibition's production, on broadening the audience, on museum activities, etc.), as well as the political and ideological orientations of the management and/or curators. When these dimensions are combined, they reveal segments within the same group, at the time they widen the gaps among those professionals performing the same activity, now bonded by "colleague-competitor" relationships. But, paradoxically, this segmentation contributes to increasing the group's vigilance against reform projects which could affect them, thereby consolidating the profession's boundaries in the face of adversity, as embodied by public authorities. Still, the pathway can be altogether different, as in the case of preventive archeology specialists. At the turn of the 21st century, they were subject to brutal changes in the regulation of their activity, as the opening to competition enabled private operators—as well as local authorities—to open up excavation sites and break the monopoly of the public operator (Bonnefon, ongoing). This led to a diversification of employers and employment statuses, with a strong growth in temporary contracts and a deterioration of the wage ratio, weakening the group's cohesion despite the persistence of the same framework of activity and expertise. With the diversification of statuses, it is the working conditions and the quality of the work produced that were weakened. However, the development of contacts, particularly scientific ones, among preventive archaeologists of all statuses had a limiting effect on divisions and inaugurated a renewal of coalescence which prefigured a refreshed professionalization dynamic. In these two cases we observe a composite and multidirectional professionalization, associated with group "re-stratification" (Kirkpatrick *et al.* 2009).

These two examples make it possible to identify a structural and structuring characteristic of a number of professional groups: the liberal practice, often related to professional status, occupies a marginal place, whereas wage labor prevails. On the contrary, this status is marginal in emblematic professional groups in France, notably medicine and law, even if it is established there: among lawyers the employment rate is around 5%, with strong disparities depending on specialties, with a strong dissemination in large international firms. Among physicians, progress in wages is difficult to assess accurately, but a growing number of communities are opening health centers in order to fight against medical deserts and offering to hire physicians there (who remain 20 times fewer in number than liberal practitioners), whereas 20% of young physicians prefer wage labor to freelancing (Source: *Ordre national des médecins*; Conti 2019). Wage labor imposes additional constraints on the professional, the counterpart for the protection provided by the status. This in fact gives rise to an additional actor, namely the employer, who rightly formulates demands on the activity, reinforcing the population of those around professional groups, who are then confronted with managers, hierarchical agents, chief executive

officers. In broader terms, wage labor can introduce rules which overflow the sphere of work/activity and influence the integration conditions of the professional group through recruitment practices, the professional territory through the hierarchy of missions and group cohesion through assessment schemes and career modulation (Boussard *et al.* 2010).

The acknowledgment of wage labor in the analysis of professionalization was progressive and, above all, was first interpreted as a threat to the autonomy of professionals and a degradation in the capacity of professional groups to administer their territory. Since the 1970s in the United States, this perspective has been oriented towards the analysis of relationships between professional groups and organizations, insisting on their conflicting nature. Indeed, the groups exposed to wage labor are heterogeneous. They differentiate themselves depending on their degree of structuring, the force of attraction of their organizations, the power of their representatives, cohesion in the defense of their interests, their capacities for collective struggle, or even their social prestige, the legal protections acquired, or the trust they inspire. But regardless of their empirical situation, wage labor and enrollment in more or less bureaucratic organizations could reverse the professionalization process, inaugurating its deterioration. Three major processes of this type have been identified. The thesis on *deprofessionalization* developed by Haug (1975) exposes how the rationalization of organizations, as well as the rise in consumer movements, led to subordinating professional autonomy to exogenous goals, depriving professionals from the power to set benchmarks for assessing their own work. This in turn, weakened the professional group's capacity for action. It has also been argued that the trend inserting professionals into the wage system exposes them to an alignment of their condition with that of any worker forced to sell their labor force, thus supporting a form of *proletarianization* characterized by a rigid assignment of tasks by hierarchies, and creating a "factory-like" scenario (Oppenheimer 1973). In the wage labor context, the relationship between professionalization and *bureaucratization* is described as inverted in most cases (Hall 1968). The inclusion of professionals in hierarchical lines would transform their work via a *bureaucratization* process (Scott 1966): their activity being planned by superiors who relay the purposes of the organization, control their results and disqualify their own rules and collegial norms.

Wage labor, which is the dominant status in post-industrial societies, very much like the French society which is described as a "wage society" (Castel 1995), is seemingly the Achilles heel of professionalization, at least if compared with the liberal status, idealized and confined to a few rare activities. These analyses were rekindled with the progression of the *New Public Management*, which penetrated public organizations where many professionals toiled, and was expected to weaken the

autonomy and power acquired by professional groups (Bézès and Demazière 2011). This reactivated an old polarity identified by research on the relationships between organizations and professional groups, opposing *management* and *professions*, or *managerialism* vs. *professionalism* (Gleeson and Knights 2006). Other works called for overcoming essentialist or homogenizing visions of the professional reality (Evetts 2003, 2006) and for thinking more carefully about the relationships between organizations and professions (Ackroyd 1996; Kirkpatrick and Muzio 2011). On these aspects, the reader can refer to the chapter by Valérie Boussard.

The wage labor status or enrollment in a bureaucratic organization does not necessarily threaten the professional expertise which characterizes work activities, but rather fuels collective consciousness, the sense of shared interests and collegiality. Because a number of professional groups integrated into organizations and working in the administration, for example, in the field of health care (notably the hospital sector), justice, police, education, higher education or even social action, appeal to specialized and codified knowledge, rely upon practical knowledge acquired through experience, know how to cope with the cases they are confronted with, refer to a shared conception of their function and recognize themselves in a collective identity defined by their specialty: their *métier* (Lipsky 1980; Sternberg and Horvarth, 1999). However, dependence on their employer hinders the creation of professional organizations and the structuring of collective action oriented towards the group's endurance. This situation which distances them from the *professional status* model could be designated by new expressions such as *occupational professions* or *organizational professions* (Noordegraaf 2007). These expressions invite us to think about professional groups as a continuum of hybrid and mixed forms, rather than situate them within a metric of professionalization. This signals a rupture between professionalization and the professional status. Analyzing professionalization requires observing not only the internal dynamics of professional groups, but also their relationships with other actors (of which organizational actors are but one example, among political bodies, social movements, market operators, regulatory authorities, groups of all kinds), which flourish at their boundaries and have potential effects on them.

2.2.3. Professional groups as professionalizations

The configuration of professional groups is at the heart of Abbott's processual approach (Abbott 2016), as is his analysis of the "system of professions" (Abbott 1988). Fundamentally, this author proposed considering social entities (such as professional groups) as something secondary to boundaries, to the delimitation processes establishing and displacing their contours, in short, to professionalization processes. This position was synthesized by a stunning formula: "we should not look

for boundaries of things but for things of boundaries” (Abbott 1995a). This “*things of boundaries idea*” inaugurated a real theoretical counterpoint, rejecting the assumption that “the social world consists of fixed entities (the units of analysis) that have attributes (the variables) [which interact] to create outcomes, themselves measurable as attributes of the fixed entities” (Abbott 2001, p. 39). In contrast, entities, like professional groups, should not be considered as fixed realities, whose essence could be revealed by clarification analysis or sociohistorical purification, inferring certain attributes from them or passing them through the sieve of specific criteria. Instead of being at the origin of the processes which make them come about, they are the outcome, the product of a permanent work of adjustment and differentiation of boundaries.

While the theory is general, it is nonetheless relevant for the historical analysis of professionalization and the emergence of professional groups. The case study of social work in the United States at the end of the 19th century (Abbott 1995b) shows that the activities, services, tasks associated and coagulated by the delineation of a new boundary making social work appear as a visible professional space pre-dated the existence of organized groups or collectives claiming such place in the division of labor or such label. The gradual and slow crystallization of an area of specialized tasks took place without an institution or collective delimiting it, controlling it, or labeling it. Those tasks were initially fulfilled by disparate categories of workers. They formed a vague, unstable and uncertain whole whose contours were gradually asserted and clarified, without such boundaries (yet) designating a precise entity or professional group. Those emerging boundaries produced uncertain, “differentiation sites” still under construction. As a consequence, a variety of workers were disseminated along both sides of such boundaries, differentiating them into categories which asserted themselves, whereas others faded, were recomposed or simply disappeared. The activities and workers located within the emerging perimeter resonated with one another, forming sets which appeared more and more significant, until becoming differentiated and designated by the (vaguely unifying or constitutive but still fragile at that stage), expression “social work”.

Over time, a professional group came to exist through the articulation and consolidation of boundaries, which enabled the transformation of a “differentiation site” into a more visible, robust and enduring unit: in that case, social work, which no longer designated an uncertain phenomenon (as it had before), but a social entity having hatched along that process. Professionalization did not operate without the intervention of actors. But this is not a question of social work professions, since they were secondary to the connection of boundaries and did not yet exist as such. It was rather a question of charitable movements, government services, workers attached to varied tasks, which contributed to the coalescence of social work as a differentiated

set of activities. However, that coalescence was partly contingent. While certain tasks were integrated into the area of activities still under construction, others were not. Such differentiation varied depending on country and time, to the point that, as Abbott has stressed, social work might not have existed as we know it today. It could also disappear as an entity, because entities are never stable and subject to perpetual change, to such extent that permanence is ultimately an “accidental outgrowth” (Abbott 2007, p. 8).

In line with his processual perspective, Abbott traced a concept of professionalization acknowledging social work, but without taking the form of an alignment with constitutive criteria. He showed that the regime of existence of social work evolved over the period studied, following an uncertain and specific path. First of all, it appeared as a poorly identified sphere of activity. Then, the very dynamic of the activity created a certain inertia, something to attach to, something which became more visible, something which showed signs of existence, something invested by various actors, something which became less and less uncertain. The existence of social work was thus affirmed, this “something” became a thing or an entity, endowed with increasing internal coherence and a certain endurance, until it became an institution with more clearly delineated and progressively protected boundaries, through formalized rules, enabling the development of specialized professional groups. His analysis of social work had the particularity of being historical, centered on the birth—and one could even say the gestation prior to the birth—of social work. But in other texts, he emphasized different moments of this continuous social process we have come to call professionalization. He illuminated the way in which professions are born, grow and die, split or regroup, adapt or innovate (Abbott 1988). We can therefore wonder—as Abbott does in the last paragraphs of his text—what happens to the theory of boundary work in the case where professions are constituted, when they are organized—*de facto*—entities or things. How can we maintain the idea of the primacy of boundaries over professional groups not when these are in their infancy, but when they have become solid entities, institutions? What happens with professionalization, then?

The scope of the theory does not reduce professionalization to a state where professional groups assert themselves and become objectified, manifesting the existence of an exclusive community whose members are united by collegiality relationships and whose access is regulated by mechanisms which precisely let boundaries be guarded. From the processual perspective, professionalization is provisional and unfinished. The analysis can be extended to all regimes of existence of professional groups, whatever the state of coalescence, visibility, recognition, weakening or decay which characterizes them. This means that professional groups (more or less constituted, coherent or contested), are constantly confronted with the

challenge of their survival. Their future is established in relation to other entities, themselves more or less consolidated, and who somehow find an interest in professional services: competing, subordinate, complementary groups, and audiences (clienteles, public authorities, certification agencies, the public opinion, etc.). These relationships can be extremely varied: conflict, predation, parasitism, threat, imitation, alliance, symbiosis, etc. And they centrally concern boundaries, which they potentially call into question, destabilize, displace, to the point of weakening/consolidating differentiation sites whose metamorphoses mark the dynamics of professional groups, of professionalization.

Dependent on the systems of actors, professional groups cannot persist in an autarkic manner, withdrawing to the territory of their practice. These audiences are often decisive in the allocation of jurisdiction, to the extent that they “serve as arbiters, because their own legitimacy has its roots outside the system of professions” (Abbott 2003, p. 30). Furthermore, and this opens up towards an unlimited diversification of the ingredients of professionalization, Abbott emphasized that those audiences are not homogeneous and uniform, but form ecologies linked to one another (Abbott 2003). Like professional groups, they are crossed by tensions and conflicts, operating by competing conceptions of their action in relation to such or such professional group, which increases the variability of relationships and interdependencies between professional groups and audiences, between professional ecologies and external ecologies. In this ecological and processual conception, professional groups, and more broadly, society, are never in balance; “conflict and unpredictability are the nature of social life” (Abbott 2006, p. 318), professional groups are dynamics or flows, in other words, professionalizations.

Regardless of the degree of thingness or endurance of professional groups—and *professions* have reached the highest degrees in this matter—boundaries are shifting, offering sites for observing professional dynamics. Professional groups are the product of history and of social work along the boundaries having constituted them. As such, they cannot break free from those boundaries, they are inseparable from the audiences surrounding them, just as they are inseparable from work at their boundaries, and from their boundaries. Any professional group has the status of an unfinished process, of a flow of events, partly controlled and partly unpredictable, of intertwining relationships at the boundaries, articulating variable combinations of potentialities, tensions, alliances, conflicts, threats. In other words, professional groups, whatever their degree of institutionalization, are professionalizations in themselves.

2.3. Conclusions

Finally, to seize professionalization in terms of the boundaries dynamics between professional groups invites us not to make assumptions on the solidity of such boundaries and on the consistency of the groups they contribute to differentiating. In that sense, professionalization is not the recognition of a professional group and its more or less opposed rapprochement with a statutory figure of reference—the *profession*—nor does it designate the capacity of a professional group to impose itself in the face of the demands from partners engaged in the normative definition of the activity—a job well done. It is a broader process. It designates the differentiation and continuous recomposition of occupational activities and the workers who perform them, while focusing on a division of labor which accentuates professional dynamics.

The concept of professionalization carries a strong ambition: to designate the division of labor, the continuous production of activities and groups as well as the recomposition of their relationships. Considering labor from this angle sheds light on fundamental social mechanisms affecting the whole labor market: 1) differentiation, through which social categorizations, the variable autonomy of groups and cross-dependencies including them in productive organizations and labor markets are recomposed; 2) coalition, through which collective identifications are formed, the defense of specific interests is organized, and multiple conceptions of activities are confronted or combined; 3) recognition, which despite the sources of more or less stable inequalities, leads to self-realization (work remunerations are regulated, differential valorizations distributed).

From this perspective, professional groups do not form a homogeneous whole—this is a mechanical consequence of the processual approach—but on the contrary, considerably differ by their degree of internal institutionalization, their capacity to dominate audiences, their mastery of selection at entry, their power to control their members, etc. In view of the perspective deployed here, no combination of characteristics constitutes a reference figure or a model of accomplished professionalization. Briefly stated: there is no accomplished professionalization, this being considered as intrinsically and irremediably provisional and unfinished. All professional groups, regardless of their visibility and identity, are confronted with the same challenge for asserting a place in an interrupted division of labor. Professionalization is not uniform, but on the contrary, it is distinctive and hierarchical, it produces multiple differentiations across occupational activities which concern the collective form of groups, the legitimacy of their expertise, the valorization of their work, the recognition of their usefulness, etc. Professionalization is not autonomous, but collective and disseminated, dependent on ecologies or systems of actors having an interest in the activity in question, and therefore working on the boundaries between this and the group. It is work—comprising struggles, alliances, construction of fortresses and offensives—at the boundaries of groups,

which governs their reconfiguration and the modification of their contours, their legitimacy, their endurance. Professionalization concerns all professional groups, those which are in an embryonic state and relatively indistinct as well those which have become asserted, institutionalized entities. It follows heterogeneous paths in their outlines, their directions, their —always provisional—points of arrival.

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