The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism

Rolf Torstendahl
This book examines the evolution of historical professionalism, with the development of an international community that shares a set of values regarding both methodological minimum demands and what constitutes new results. Historical professionalism is not a fixed set of skills but a concept with varying import and meaning at different times depending on changing norms. Torstendahl covers the propagation of these different ideals and of new educational forms from the late eighteenth century to the present, from Leopold von Ranke’s state-centrism to a historiography borne by social theories.

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The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism

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For my wife TAMARA
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Preface

A guiding principle of this book is close to something that the late Irmline Veit-Brause used to say, namely that the principles of historiography are best studied as a constant interaction between the history and the theory of historiography. I am indebted to her and several other friends who are now out of reach of words of gratitude for perspectives that I have internalized as mine.

Colleagues have been generous with their time in reading and commenting on versions of one or several chapters at different stages. Some have been kind enough to read the whole book. I thus want to thank Mikhail Bibikov, Gunnel Cederlöf, Elisabeth Elgán, Gunlög Fur, Jürgen Kocka, Jean-Claude Robert, Staffan Rosén, Nils-Eric Sahlin, Tamara Torstendahl Salytjeva, Henrik Ågren, and Maria Ågren. I especially want to thank Jürgen Kocka for a close scrutiny of Chapter 7, Maria Ågren for an intense examination of the whole book, Nils-Eric Sahlin for his helpful discussion of the philosophical parts, and Tamara Torstendahl Salytjeva for her encouraging and critical remarks. Editors of the journals where the original versions were published were also very helpful, as were anonymous reviewers called in by Routledge for this book. Several improvements are due to their comments, but remaining faults and unclear points are mine.

Many colleagues in Uppsala and Moscow and at conferences and congresses have unknowingly contributed to this book through daily discussions informally or in seminars, many more than I could mention by name.

I also want to thank the Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities (Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitetsakademien) for a grant which made it possible for me to conduct research in the Archives Nationales in Paris, where the post-war archives of CISH are housed.

Quite a number of historians, especially in the last few decades, have maintained other views of professionalism than those advanced in this book. I have tried to do justice to their arguments at the same time as I refute them. That this is a complicated affair is easily understood. I want only to affirm that my intention has never been to misrepresent an argument or to misunderstand a previous analysis. For the sake of clarity one or another
nuance of an argument may have been omitted, but I have done so wilfully only when I have regarded the loss as without importance for the cardinal point in the object of discussion.

Uppsala and Moscow, February 2014
Rolf Torstendahl
This book is a mixture of quite new chapters and such that take up things that I have developed earlier. Several of the chapters of this book have been published elsewhere, and I want to thank the original publishers for their permission to reprint. However, all original versions have been revised here, sometimes only in details, but in other chapters essential matters have been added or changed.

Chapters 1, 7, 8, 9, and 11 are entirely new.

Chapter 2 was originally an article entitled ‘History-Writing as Professional Production of Knowledge’, in *Storia della Storiografia* 48 (2005): 73–88.


Chapter 4 was originally an article entitled ‘Vozvrashchenie istorizma? Neo-institutsionalizm i “istoricheskii povorot” v sotsialnykh naukakh’, in *Dialog so vremenem* 30 (2010): 14–25.

Chapter 5 is partly directly from the article ‘From All-Round to Professional Education: How Young Historians Became Members of an Academic Community in the Nineteenth Century’, in *Leidschrift* 25 (2010): 17–31, and partly new.


Chapter 10 was originally an article entitled “Novye rezultaty” i “nauchnye revoliutsii” v istorii’, in *Dialog so vremenem* 43 (2013): 5–23.

Rolf Torstendahl
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Introduction

In bookshops there is no scarcity of books that are labelled ‘history’, often lumped together with biographies and memoirs. Even for the connoisseur it may be difficult to find out which ones, of the offered abundance, ‘seriously’ add to previous knowledge in a field in which he or she is interested. ‘Seriously’ in this connection means the same as ‘really’ in everyday language—or ‘according to the professional rule system’ in the circles of university-employed historians.

This book focuses on exactly this ‘professional rule system’ as a problem. This means that not only the history and transformations of historical professionalism from its beginnings to the present will be treated, but also the fundamental question for what purpose and by what means historians have claimed and claim a professional status. This book goes a different way than previous literature on the subject both in regard to the rule system as such and in its division into two parts with different functions.

Historical professionalism has been a subject that I have been working with for a very long time, even though I did not use the term ‘historical professionalism’ from the start. When I was working on professionalism in general with several sociologists and historians in the 1980s, I developed a new interest in the characteristics of the professionalism of historians, for in some respects these characteristics seemed to be different from those of the groups that are usually referred to as ‘the professions’. During the last ten years I have written several articles in journals and have contributed to anthologies on this subject, and several of them form the basis of some chapters in this book. The book has some traits of a monograph but is also intended to be useful as a textbook for advanced students (at the graduate level): It presents different views and argues for some standpoints and ideas and against some others.

When I want to call it something like a monograph I do not have in mind a historical work following the development of historical professionalism from its beginnings up to the present. Even if there is a chronological organization of the issues that I am taking up, many things I regard as unimportant are left out. Instead, I want to follow different aspects of the subject matter in different chapters. As these aspects sometimes overlap, some points of
view have to be partly repeated, but I have tried to avoid a tiresome repetition of details.

The main concern of the book is professionalism and the ways it applies to historians. There are two main constituent parts of this subject. One is sociological and has to do with the interaction between historians required for professional recognition—that is, something that is at least suggestive of the official certificates that make doctors, barristers, and other professional practitioners entitled to their professional standing. The other is philosophical and constitutes the epistemological requirements that contemporary historical professionals ask for in a professional piece of history-writing. I have to stress ‘contemporary’, for one of the theses of the book is that the set of norms which a professional historian is expected to follow has been changing during the last two hundred years. It is not constantly shifting but has gone through some important changes, which have had the effect that earlier front-line figures of the profession have become the object of professional critique. The idea of professionalism as a relatively solid set of norms is, of course, something that collides with the general idea of postmodernism and its notion of a fluid interpretation of ‘history’, which is guided rather by the ability to make readers feel touched by the past than by a normative consensus in the academic community. Thus, my standpoint is constructivist in a general sense but rejects postmodernism’s total relativism.

In these terms the book is a monograph on the development of historical professionalism. In the first instance it is a history of its rise and changes, and its sociological and philosophical aspects serve as instruments for the analysis.
In Europe much of what is fundamental in scholarship and science goes back to the ancient Greek tradition. There, two words stand for the basic principles of all knowledge: *philosophia* and *historein*. Philosophy, the first of these terms, denoted the love of knowledge and wisdom, which comprised both epistemology and moral behaviour. *Historein* meant ‘investigate’, and the content of the term was only later monopolized for ‘history’ as we understand the term. Plato was a philosopher in the original sense, whereas Aristotle gave place to empirical investigations, which were the core of *historein*. The grand systems of wisdom became the objects of a reverence that was not given to empirical investigations. Philosophy, including mathematics, geometry and epistemology, moral and aesthetic considerations, and principles of government, thus had a higher status than empirical investigations. History (in our sense) was of the latter type. This evaluation remained from Antiquity at least to the Enlightenment and is sometimes heard even today.

HISTORY THE MOTHER-DISCIPLINE

It should be said from the beginning that this book is limiting its perspective to European history-writing up to the twentieth century. What was understood as writing on history in other parts of the world than the European region before 1900 is only occasionally hinted at. The reason for this exclusivity is that, as far as I know, there are no signs of an emerging historical professionalism (as this concept is defined later in this chapter) in any other cultural context before it was launched at European universities in the nineteenth century; further, no ideas of what ought to be looked into by historians and by what means historical investigations ought to be performed were transmitted from any non-European cultural context into the European and North American academic culture before 1900. Other ways of understanding what history is and how it should be cultivated are well worth study, and a glimpse of the variations may be found in the recently published five volumes of *The Oxford History of Historical Writing* (2011–12), though
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this work, too, may be somewhat biased in favour of the European (and North American) understanding of history, as few of the authors who treat non-European historical traditions are insiders of these cultures.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries something new happened in the relation between history as a subject of learning and the many disciplines that work with a time aspect on humans and human culture. Some of these have had or still have the word ‘history’ in their names, such as the history of literature, history of art, history of science, economic history, social history, etc. Not only do some of them tend to leave out ‘history of’ in their names, but many of them also seek another identity than the one provided by their historical aspect. Literature without history is a text-analysing branch of knowledge, where the ‘deconstruction’ of the content is not the only option, although, when it was introduced, it caused a break with the past with an audible crack that earlier efforts to liberate the discipline from its historical perspectives had not managed to effectuate. However, there are other disciplines which have had a close connection to the discipline of history without any appeal to history in their names. First of all this is true of archaeology but also of many of its regional sub-branches, such as Egyptology, or sub-branches focused on specific materials, such as ‘vaseology’ or ‘megalitology’, denoting systematized knowledge of ceramic vases and large-stone monuments respectively.

What has happened in the relation between the discipline of history and many of its former sub-disciplines is not only that they have liberated themselves in a formal way. They have become established disciplines in their own right. One of the consequences of this development is that they do not, as they once did, look to history for a lead in their professional attitude. Nowadays, professionalism in archaeology is not directly related to professionalism in history. As we will see in Chapter 7 of this book it was an ambition in the early phase of the international historical congresses to gather representatives of all disciplines with a historical aspect at these congresses. The ambition behind this understanding of history as a kind of studies forming an umbrella over several disciplines was never quite explicit, but it had something to do with a notion that all studies of the past had one type of reasoning in common. This notion implied some general intellectual grounds of history, shared by all who worked on human manifestations in the past and thus partaking in a wide historical professionalism.

Historical professionalism relates the individual historical researcher to a collectivity of historians, the academic community of historians. The connections between this community and the university system were changing in the early nineteenth century. At that time the idea of an all-embracing background of studies in all disciplines in the philosophical faculty was still obligatory for further studies in the ‘higher’ faculties in order to become a professional practitioner in the Church, in the court-room, or in the hospital. During the nineteenth century this high evaluation of a common intellectual heritage in all qualified professional work dissolved. At the same
time a quite new interest in research appeared in the humanities, and this was a basic condition for the rise of new disciplines and at the same time of researchers’ professionalism in each of these disciplines and specialities. The process of fragmentation of history is thus one of the objects of study in this book; another is the ambition to maintain a common professionalism within the discipline delimited in one way or another. The fragmentation occurs not only through the appearance of new disciplines from the bosom of history but also in a change of priorities among historians, who want to see history as their profession. This is something that I will have reason to revert to frequently.

Fragmentation of history thus is an important side issue of this study. Whereas professionalism mainly worked as a centripetal force of the discipline, giving the impetus to scholars to keep together around certain norms, fragmentation was a centrifugal force, creating specialities. Some of them did not give priority to a common set of norms for historians, which in turn led to dissolution and diversity. Other specialities, however, did not object to being part of the discipline of history with its general norms. Thus, differentiation and fragmentation have taken different shapes. What I have been calling ‘forces’ here is, of course, nothing but the ambitions of individual historians. When several individual historians by education or persuasion share the same norms, it may seem like a ‘force’ that is driving the discipline in one direction or the other.

From Antiquity, history has played the role of mother-discipline for a series of new disciplines. This was a natural process as long as the original meaning of the Greek work *historein*, ‘investigate’ (or ‘ask’ or ‘tell’), was vivid in the minds of researchers. Herodotus and Thucydides were the masters of such investigations that European historians long tried to imitate. However, there was no terminological opposition between being a historian writing history (in our limited sense), on the one hand, and being a researcher pursuing any sort of empirical investigation, on the other. Natural history in this sense of ‘history’ was created as a word for the big taxonomic work of some learned men in Antiquity, who tried to create an overview of the ‘natural’ world, i.e. all living beings besides humankind. The most well-known author of this tradition is Pliny the Elder, probably partly because of his use of the term *Naturalis historia* for his main work. There were others with similar purposes before Pliny, such as Strabo, who is known as a geographer but was in fact an observer of the same kind as Pliny. Both tried to classify a mass of knowledge into an encyclopaedic system about the world.

When ‘history’ (as a concept for the seeking of knowledge about the past) in the late Roman era and during the Middle Ages became a term primarily for narratives of wars and accounts of circumstances and events in states and state-like formations, it became closely connected with politics. Writers of this kind of history most often had an ambition to justify their own deeds or were commissioned to show the just cause that had been the driving force behind the commissioner’s actions. Caesar’s *De bello gallico* is a well-known
example of this kind, and bishop Gregory of Tours’s *Decem libri historiarum* is a later example, depicting the turmoil in the late Merovingian kingdom of France in the late sixth century.

In the following centuries chronicles and annals came to dominate the historical literature. There were real masters of the art of writing chronicles already from the tenth century and onwards. Men like Widukind and Liutprand (both from the tenth century) chose their topics both to entertain the reader (or listener, as most early historical works were read aloud) and to show who was right in past political struggles. All those who wrote chronicles were not masters, and sometimes chronicles bordered closely on annals, which were based on chronology and presented an enumeration of dates and a number of ‘facts’, each under its date, without any ambitions to make clear any eventual connections between the events that were taken down. Chronicles normally gave more than such dry listings of events, and a ‘modern’ kind of European historiography can be said to have its origin in the chronicles of the Middle Ages. A much-admired example of a rich and varied narrative chronicle is the one authored by Froissart in the fourteenth century. His chronicles, in four books, cover the years 1322–1400. For part of this period Froissart was employed as the official historiographer of Philippa of Hainault (the Queen Consort of Edward III of England) and other royalties, but it is questionable how well these offices were paid. His detailed accounts of events and habits give vivid pictures of what was going on in France. His stories not only were celebrated by contemporaries and occasional historians but have formed the backbone of Barbara Tuchman’s celebrated and popular book on late medieval culture.

The authors of some chronicles became renowned, and, when famous, they were often employed by kings or princes to embellish their activities in political matters, in many cases including wars. They did not normally regard their fellow chroniclers as colleagues with whom they could share experiences and sources and discuss matters of history-writing, but in the Renaissance they started to cite each other’s works both as confirmation of their own opinions and for polemical purposes. In the Humanism of European universities of the sixteenth century this common culture among chroniclers and historical authors gradually deepened, and something like a learned discipline of history emerged with historians as its practitioners. In the seventeenth century historians often engaged in active research into the past. They also engaged in debates with other historians as they wanted to know about earlier works treating their subject, and they did not shrink from acknowledging the merits of their predecessors.

It is often said—though less often nowadays than fifty to a hundred years ago—that the Enlightenment was using history for moral purposes and trying to extract lessons for princes and peoples from the past, which made historians disregard history for its own sake. It is true that some of the most celebrated eighteenth-century historians, e.g. Gibbon and Voltaire, wanted to illustrate what bad government might lead to, but this is also
the time when German universities began to employ historians who wrote and lectured about the best way of getting good knowledge about past events. In this respect the Göttingen professors distinguished themselves. Most famous among them was August Ludwig von Schlözer, who had several later well-known historians as students, such as Arnold Heeren, Karl Friedrich Eichhorn, and Johannes von Müller. Whereas the Göttingen circle became famous for its methods, historians at other universities, for instance Johann Martin Chladenius in Erlangen, were rather occupied with the philosophy of history, and Chladenius especially with hermeneutics. In spite of the flourishing of learned activities at the German universities, no common conception of the purpose and means of studying history was developed. Rather, almost every university created a school of its own in regard to historical studies and research.

This brief overview of the development of history-writing in Europe before 1800 is intended only to show that it took a long time before a learned culture with history as its subject came into existence. From having been an instrument of politics and, in a broad tradition from Antiquity, of moral and political reflection, history gradually took its place as a branch of learning for the sake of knowledge about the past. The main concern of this book is not history-writing as such but historical professionalism, and this is also something that can be traced back in the history of historiography.

There are two different senses of ‘professional’ which have to be kept apart from each other, even if they overlap. In the first sense a professional historian is one who is employed and paid for writing history; in the second sense a professional historian is recognized by other historians (the community of historians) to be admitted among them. Professionalism in the second sense is the main subject of this entire book. Before going into that matter I will develop briefly the history of professionalism in the first sense, for it has a long history.

HISTORICAL PROFESSIONALISM: SENSE 1

Long before the nineteenth century there were historians who were employed to do research on history and to write historical works, which means that they were ‘professional historians’ in the first sense of the term. This sense of ‘professional’—which permits one also to talk about professional politicians, professional hockey players, professional plumbers, and so on—designates that the indicated persons are paid for using their specific skills and that they are able to live by their earnings from the activity. It is important that there must be some specific skill that is used by ‘professionals’ in this sense and also that they are paid at least enough for using their skill that they need not rely on substantial side incomes for their livelihood. Some are paid much more than others—this does not matter. They are all professionals as opposed to amateurs, the latter being persons who claim to
practise the same skill but only in their spare time and for free or in return for small sums that force them to have an occupation or fortune which provides their main income.

Professional historians in this sense may have existed in ancient China, and it is known that Sima Qian, who lived in the second century BCE, was employed as Grand Historian (or Grand Scribe) by Emperor Wu in the year 105 BCE. He wrote a major historical work, the Shiji, which required extensive archival research. As he was a productive person he wrote several books or parts of the same work, among them a theoretical discourse on history and important annals in one part and biographies in another. It is very difficult to see how he could have managed this historical production without being able to devote all his time to it, and it is even difficult to imagine that he could have done all of it single-handedly. There seem to be no traces of direct support. Later dynastic historians in China had an office with clerks at their disposal, but this is several hundreds of years after Sima’s lifetime. In the years 940–45 Ban Gu was employed to write the history of the Tan dynasty, and this was labelled as one of the exemplary histories that had an official stamp. Sima’s work seems to have been much more of his personal choice and composed according to his own ideas. It is also evident from the monograph by Iurii L. Krol’ on Sima’s work that Sima lived in a cultural environment and related his work to that of other authors. The reputation of Sima Qian was early and lasting. His work is remarkable, for there are no known counterparts in other countries to such an employment as a historian until many centuries later. The first Korean historians, in the eighth century, were politicians who wrote history to further their own interests. In other cultures professional historians in this sense appeared even later. In India the Hindu culture with its cyclical time perspective made history a branch of knowledge closely connected with cosmology, and those who first told the puranas are not known, as fiction and poetry went hand in hand. In Greece and Rome there is no evidence that the famous historians were able to live from their writings. Learned activities were normally something that only wealthy people could devote themselves to; therefore, employment as a historian and the like did not exist. No book market existed, of course, and only narrow elites knew of the historians’ works, as copying was very burdensome. The originator probably was proud to have his thoughts copied with his authorship mentioned and thus did not prevent copying. “A book belonged to its author as long as it stayed in his hands. After that it was free as air.” These words by Beryl Smalley characterize an advanced culture that is devoid of the market functions which make possible professionalism in sense 1, where the professional historian lives from history-writing.

The development of historiography in Europe during the Middle Ages that we have related above changed the situation. There were no medieval historians who could compete with Herodotus or Livius in reputation, but, on the other hand, there were institutions (the Church and worldly princes) that were willing to pay for a history which might legitimize their claims to
spiritual leadership or secular kingship. Real employment was rare. Monks wrote annals but did not formally live by their historical writings. Some chroniclers could do so at least for a time, if they were engaged by princes or cities. One European country is worth mentioning for its specific relation to history, Iceland. The Icelandic sagas gave an opportunity to earn a name that had a similarity to the historians of the Antiquity, and Snorri Sturluson is well known for his wide authorship on historical matters. Yet as far as we know he, like the ancient masters, did not earn money (or an equivalent) from his historical learning.

In the early modern period, kings and states rather than churches and cities hired historians to embellish their contemporary politics or their recent past. The title of Historiographer of the Realm (somewhat varied in different countries) was sought after by historians as it gave some pecuniary revenue and a standing in the court, but it was hardly ever salaried in a way that permitted its bearer to live from it. The French title Historiographe du Roi was long-lived (1554–1824), but the holders of the title were many (104). The title in itself was a reward, even though Pim den Boer claims that these historians were not highly regarded at court. In Sweden the title was Historiographer of the Realm. It was used from 1618 to 1834 and did not refer to a court office but formally to an office of the Chancellery, and most of the time it was a poorly paid honorary title with few obligations.

The early modern period also saw the first traces of a market orientation of European historiography through the advancement of printing. A new type of historians arose, people who reported from the great wars in Europe and gave overviews of important battles with war scenes and political analysis. This type of history, based on the fly-leaves of the fighting parties and on interviews with victims and with the defeated as well as with the winning side, was a sort of historical journalism of contemporary events that was printed and sold, and the *Theatrum Europaeum* is the foremost example.

In the eighteenth century the printed histories written by famous historians sold well, but it was hardly a main source of income for men like Voltaire or Gibbon. However, in eighteenth-century Britain a new demand for history arose, according to Carolyn Steedman. This demand had two main forms. On the one hand, history was a main subject in schools, especially girls’ schools. “David Hume’s *History of England* (1778)—which sold, and sold well, unlike his philosophical works—was abridged for schools and schoolboys, and enjoyed continued popularity.” On the other hand, social origins and social transformation were often discussed by both magistrates and servants, thus giving history a contemporary value as a guideline. Authors who tried to respond to this demand were rarely university men but rather employees of the legal system.

In schools there had been a demand for history since the Renaissance in a very similar form to the uses that British servants and magistrates found for it in the eighteenth century. Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* came to be a standard ingredient in schools, not, in the first instance, to make pupils acquainted
with events in the past, but for the moral lessons that might be learned from his comparisons of twenty-two pairs of historical persons from ancient Greece and Rome and from his discussions of their moral qualities. However, Plutarch as author had no profit from this in his lifetime, for he died around the year 120 CE, and he was not the only author with this fate, as schools often used books or abridged texts by ancient authors.

The step was not long from Plutarch’s use of biographies from the past to the successful histories written by Voltaire (on Louis XIV and on Karl XII of Sweden) or Gibbon (on the fall of the Roman Empire). These authors and many other historical writers of the eighteenth century tried to give their readers an impression of the struggle with moral problems that, in their view, had been an essential ingredient in the lives of powerful men in the past.

When eighteenth-century historians drew moral conclusions (some of them did and others did not, but the moral content has become known as typical for Enlightenment historiography), they wanted to educate their readers. History as such was not thought to be educative by these authors, though others, for instance the German Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), saw historical development as a central object of any education. In the nineteenth century it became common to give history a central place in all education, claiming for its study both usefulness and Bildung. Of course, Herder’s view, which became influential in the nineteenth century, meant a new interest in the academic study of history and a real jumpstart for historical professionalism. This professionalism, the academic professionalism of history, is thus something quite different from the professionalism as bread-winning that we have considered so far.

Before I leave the first sense of professionalism there is reason to underline that this sense has remained an alternative to professionalism in its academic sense. It was invigorated by the growth of printed literature, and especially in the nineteenth century, educational history-books in the broad sense had great success. History-telling for ‘the people’ became very popular all over Europe though the lessons derived from the past were quite different for authors of different nationalities. These lessons depended on the past of the nation to which the author belonged, based on traditions of injustices suffered by this nation as well as its heroic answers to all challenges. It meant that neighbouring peoples were sometimes served histories which contradicted each other as regards the moral evaluation of right and wrong in wars and other relations.

In this way history was part of a nation-building process, which has been the object of wide interest in the historiographical literature recently. Very often the authors of such books as ‘History of XXX narrated for its people’ were part of the academic establishment in their countries, although less authoritative authors also tried their luck in the new market. However, it was not always easy to say whether a learned author was professional ‘only’ in sense 1 of the word or if he (or rarely she) combined earnings from the
historical book market with an acknowledged standing in the academic field. Nation-building with the help of history in education and entertaining books took place all over Europe during the entire nineteenth and well into the twentieth century and created a market for historical works that had not previously existed. Many persons of different standing tried their luck in the writing of history-books as popular history or in the form of novels (both categories in the sense of stories of national heroes more or less based on primary sources and previous literature), but also many academic historians, with a reputation among their colleagues as knowledgeable and reliable, took part in the race to engage in history-writing with a national message. Thus, it also occurred and occurs that professionalism in sense 1 was mixed with professionalism in sense 2.

The market for history-books continued to grow in the nineteenth century. In some European countries it was a good business all through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, but in others the interest in history slumped in the middle of the twentieth century, when the social sciences (in particular sociology) were launched with a vision of solving the mysteries of society and its tensions without the help of history. This slump was, however, only temporary, and soon history made inroads into the social sciences as well. More and more books on historical events, especially wars, both in the distant past and in recent history, were published and competed with historical biographies of more or less well-known people of both sexes. This popular literature had as its aim rather to entertain than to contribute to the foundation of new knowledge in the historical field. We will go further into the conditions of historical entertainment and its eventual conflict with (academic) professionalism in sense 2 in Chapter 9.

HISTORICAL PROFESSIONALISM: SENSE 2

The second sense of professionalism is what I have previously and provisionally also called academic professionalism. As historical professionalism of this kind is the central object of this book, I will not expound its history and development in this chapter. The purport of the term should, however, be discussed from a sociological point of view before I turn to the question of the rise of historical professionalism in the second sense. The important difference compared to professionalism as bread-winning is that professionalism in sense 2 has its rationale in norms for historical scholarship and that, to be valid, these norms have to be recognized within a community of scholars. Once adopted and current in a community the norms constitute a foundation for historical professionalism. The theme is developed historically in Chapters 3 and 5, but I will come back to the history of this academic professionalism throughout the book. The basic task of the book is to analyse and expose the consequences for history-writing that are connected with professionalism in this sense.
Most previous literature seems to mean that professionalism (in the second sense) is a stage in the development of history-writing which is attained during the nineteenth century. For my part I propose that professionalism is an understanding within the community of historians, which means that a community is a precondition and that the community may change the conditions for professionalism. I will try to make clear what I mean by this variability of professionalism in my historical analyses of the subject matter (Chapters 3, 5, and 7), and in other chapters (primarily Chapters 2, 6, and 9) I will develop the epistemological and social consequences of this ‘elitist’ interpretation of professionalism. In Chapter 4 I examine the neo-institutional type of professional basis for history-writing, which I find bears considerable similarities to some of the professional ideas that Leopold von Ranke brought forward, thus returning (part of) the professional ideals in historiography to their beginnings.

Professionalism has to be of an elitist character. The very idea of a profession and professionals is bound to some specific knowledge and/or skill which is not a common property but something that takes considerable effort to become acquainted with and to pick up, often through years of training. It seems that most sociologists agree on a description of this kind even though they disagree about the social relations that are involved in creating such a group. Among sociologists who were attracted to neo-Weberian interpretations in the 1970s and 1980s it was common to describe professionalism as a fencing procedure, in which a group of people formed a so-called closure around an occupation. For instance this is what doctors had been doing in order to ‘monopolize’ medicine for those who had specific training and belonged to specific associations, normally one or two in each national context. This was also what barristers, engineers, and nurses had been doing, and accountants and many others were following in their steps. The crucial matter on which neo-Weberians had difficulties reaching a consensus was related to the roles of knowledge and illusion in this process. Whereas some were inclined to interpret the closure-making as primarily a way of securing the interests of the members of the association, others took the matter of special knowledge more earnestly. However, recent studies of the professions have left the closure metaphor but are still occupied with the actual role of specific knowledge within and outside of the professional group. Now it seems that this problem is most often studied and determined in terms of ‘trust’, making professionals stand forth as groups that establish their relations to the public (clients, patients) on their ability to arouse a sense of trust in their clients. Another important branch of professional studies has concentrated on the division of labour as a key to the standing of professionals, especially Eliot Freidson in his notion of professionalism as a ‘third logic’ besides the market and bureaucracy for the social division of labour.

Professionalism in the academic disciplines may be considered as a special case in relation to professionalism in general. It is special in regard to the role of knowledge and also in regard to the relation to the reading
public. In order to be regarded as a professional (in sense 2 of this word) of any academic discipline (be it physics, astronomy, anaesthesiology, economics, psychology, sociology, art history, history, or philosophy) it is necessary to have demonstrated specialized knowledge in a way that the community of the discipline accepts. It is not, however, necessary to be a member of an association of the researchers of the discipline. Academic researchers’ professionalism—as distinct from educational academic professionalism and from administrative academic professionalism—thus has a much vaguer relation to each of its communities than does the professionalism of practitioners who have to be members of a professional society in order to get a legitimation as practitioners of the occupation (doctors, barristers, auditors, etc.). It is also evident that the self-image of academic researchers is different from that of most other professional groups, and thus they stand out as a special case in the sociology of professions. This is something that is rarely mentioned and even less often commented on by sociological researchers. When they have drawn attention to academics it has been to examine their specific ‘culture’ in different disciplines rather than to analyse the characteristics of academic professionalism as such. Those who have worked in the tradition of Burton Clark have specified the differences among academics rather than examined what he meant with the statement that all academics “are a part of a single ‘community of scholars’, sharing an interest that sets them apart from others”. However, as the quote indicates, Burton seems to have had other things than epistemological rules in mind when he wrote this. In the following investigation we will bear the specificity of academics in mind.

Historical research as an academic discipline shares with most other disciplines an unclear relation between the individual members of the profession and the community of researchers. This community is not an organization but consists of those who have an established position in scholarship, respected as ‘good historians’ by others. New members are admitted to the profession through a quite informal procedure of publishing and making their publications known to and reviewed by researchers with an acknowledged standing in the discipline. New recruits to the profession may test their acceptance by taking up discussions on scholarly questions with established historians, but there is no completely decisive test that can be performed through which a researcher can contend that he or she has become a professional historian.

The problem of who is a professional researcher and by which criteria a researcher can be judged to belong to this category has a bearing directly on the theme of this book. I will contend here that professionals tend to stick together because of their shared normative system for professionalism, which is different from what is normally seen as the norms of science or scholarship. Robert K. Merton defined a set of fundamental norms for all science called the CUDOS norms, an acronym standing for (1) common ownership of scientific discoveries (Merton used the term ‘communism’);
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(2) universal and impersonal criteria for evaluation; (3) disinterestedness among scientists in pecuniary awards from their results; and (4) organized scepticism as a rule for testing scientific results.

Merton was not primarily interested in the professionalism of scientists, and his set of norms is an ideal that scientists ought to follow as far as they can rather than something that he claims is at hand. John Ziman followed in his train, even if he modified and improved Merton’s list, which he extended with one new norm by splitting Merton’s fourth norm into two: originality of results and critical scepticism. Several later sociologists of science have criticized the CUDOS list as unrealistic and not followed in practice by scientists. As I have no ambition to set up a competing list of norms that scientists (or historians) should follow but rather want to identify how they act and argue to guard their professionalism (their exclusiveness with regard to amateurs or the like), I can just state that only part of Merton’s four (or Ziman’s five) rules coincide with what I identify as fundamental rules among historians, namely a radical scrutiny and original results. But an important difference is that both Merton and his critics tend to discuss ‘eternal’ norms, whereas I discern only norms that are products of scholarly communities.

Professionals of history-writing have an impetus to reinforce their common norms, which means, among other things, that they try to develop them further, but only in ways that may be acknowledged by the entire profession. Professionalism in itself then works centripetally in the sense of reinforcing the internal bonds of mutual understanding within the professional group, and it is directed against the centrifugal forces that tend to break up the unity of historians as a group. Such tendencies consist of cultural directions and philosophical theories that ascribe to all approaches an equal interest and to all kinds of history-writing an equal validity. I will have reason to come back to these standpoints in greater depth in different chapters of the book.

The role of special knowledge is interesting from another point of view as well. If the field of an academic profession is as wide as that of medicine, it invites specialization, which may or may not lead to sub-professions with their own rule systems. The field of barristers is different, for they have rallied around a field with specific borders which are strictly preserved within the profession. Historians are not similar to barristers, but their field is rather like that of doctors. In both fields new specialities crop up all the time. The new specialists—in the histories of mentalities, education, runic geography, shipbuilding, gendered division of work, and on and on—want to establish themselves by fortifying specific rules for their speciality. There is, however, one big difference between the specialization in history and that in medicine. Doctors have an overall organization (in each country), and if there are specialized associations they usually are linked to the general society as subdivisions. The organizational strength lies with the general national society, which coordinates all activities among doctors. With historians it
is different. The general society in a country is usually regarded only as an umbrella and a pretext for the publication of a national journal of history and some related publishing activities and possibly also for arranging national congresses.

For doctors professional unity is dependent primarily on the general (national) society—like the American Medical Association in the USA, the British Medical Association in the UK, and similar organizations in all European countries—and in other professions of practitioners the same tradition prevails. Specialization is secondary for identity, and being a physician is the superior identity. Yet there are few general journals of medicine for doctors of all specialities, but, rather, doctors keep and read only one or two specialized journals in their own branch. With historians the opposite holds. The general national historical society is a weak organization with no real authority to speak for historians in general in the country. Its basis of authority rests with the national journal, if it is well edited and has a long tradition, which many such journals have. Since the Second World War the American Historical Review has had quite another influence than the American Historical Association, and has become one of the most influential journals with the ambition to cover history in general (and not least its professional aspects). Earlier national journals, such as the German Historische Zeitschrift and the French Revue Historique, had a similar standing, but nowadays journals that began as organs for a speciality or a specific direction (like the Annales ESC, Past and Present, Geschichte und Gesellschaft, and others) have become regarded as expressing established opinions of the profession quite as much as the most respected national organs. Few historians would refer to their membership in the national society for their identity as historians, and, as a rule, only a minor part of all active historians are members. Membership sometimes means, in fact, nothing more than a subscription to the national journal, and often this is the main reason to be a member. The historian’s identity nowadays is more often attached to his or her speciality of research. The communications between members of this network, and eventually its journals and other publications, are avidly read. General national organs have realized the need for specialized publications and have often tried to meet the demand by producing special issues on specific research fields.

It is instructive to compare the academic (research) profession of historians with the profession of medicine, comprising physicians of different sorts. The similarities are great. There is an overall professional identity and a wide range of specialities that have been growing over a rather long period of time, in fact longer for doctors than for historians. The overall identity stands for the centripetal intention to keep the profession together and counteract centrifugal fragmentation.

It should be observed that doctors have their scientific identity closely connected with their speciality but keep their professional identity as physicians in the general sense. The latter is a matter not only of words but