

Wellmer, Albrecht. *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*. Translated by David Midgley. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.

#### RELATED ENTRIES

Feminism; Individualism; Men's Studies; Romanticism; Television; Urbanization

—Markus Oliver Spitz

## PROFESSIONALISM

Ideals of professionalism, like those of work more generally, have often been articulated in conjunction with notions of manliness, at least since what are commonly called “the professions” (law, medicine, and the ministry) emerged in the mid-eighteenth century. Large numbers of American men have often rooted their masculine identities in specialized training, technical expertise, and professional credentials. While the impersonal and bureaucratic codes that govern conduct and advancement in the professions constitute a departure from earlier definitions of masculinity grounded in autonomy and manual labor, the characteristics associated with professional endeavors—social indifference; intellectual power; adherence to abstract, impersonal rules; mastery of expert knowledge; an emphasis on rational behavior and thought; and a premium on advancement and achievement—have been gendered as masculine in American culture. In this way, professionalism has been central to the formation of modern constructions of manhood.

### Manhood and the Professions: 1750–1880

While the term profession dates back to Roman times, it acquired a particular meaning in the mid-eighteenth century, when a professional occupation came to be associated with status as an educated upper-class gentleman and conveyed on the practitioner a sense of honor and dignity. Men in these professions derived a sense of authority and masculinity from the intellectual labor of their work—which did not require productive effort, entrepreneurial drive, or physical labor or prowess—and from the superior position that came from their mastery of specialized knowledge and employment in highly structured and hierarchical settings. Through these professions, the authority and aristocratic honor of the gentleman became transferred to bourgeois constructions of manhood during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The professions played a critical role in shaping the male-gendered concept of American national identity that emerged

in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Whereas some leading revolutionaries, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, were farmers, many others, such as Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, both lawyers, and Benjamin Rush, a physician, came from the professions. Alexander Hamilton (in Federalist Paper No. 35, one of eighty-five essays written in support of the Constitution) and James Madison (in Federalist Paper No. 54) accorded professionals a special status as neutral arbiters and mediators, hoping that they would stabilize the new republic by mediating between different interest groups while remaining bound by duty, occupational responsibility, and dispassionate professional conduct. Yet at least one of the professions, the clergy, experienced a setback in terms of its occupational authority and status, since the disestablishment clause in the First Amendment to the Constitution explicitly withheld official authority from the churches. In contrast, the special licensing laws by which the states regulated access to medicine and the law perpetuated the particular authority and codes of manhood associated with these professions.

Between the 1830s and 1880, several social and political developments challenged older ideals of professional manhood. Political democratization, the market revolution, industrialization, and urbanization generated entrepreneurial ideals of “marketplace manhood” and “self-made manhood” and created an egalitarian notion of “democratic manhood” that undermined older professional codes of manliness grounded in aristocratic notions of rank and hierarchy. The term gentleman, previously a preserve of professionals, began to refer to all white men who conducted themselves in a proper, orderly fashion. The egalitarian and sometimes antiauthoritarian impulses produced by the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening further undermined those claims to special authority upon which the professions had relied. Finally, intensifying political partisanship undermined the ideal of the professional as neutral arbiter. In a social setting that tended to be hostile to prescribed social order and hierarchies, all the states took their special licensing laws off the books in the 1830s, opening up access to a wide variety of fields to men without special training and blurring boundaries between rightful and wrongful practitioners. Amid these transformations, the professional codes of manliness that had formed since the mid-eighteenth century lost their social force and momentum.

### The Culture of Professionalism: 1880–1945

Developments of the mid- to late nineteenth century laid the foundations of new ideals of manly professionalism. A growing concern with distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate

practitioners in a variety of fields prompted increasing efforts to define proper credentialing, usually in terms of scientific methodology and technical expertise (both gendered male in contemporary culture). The emergence and expansion of universities provided the advanced education and specialized training by which would-be professionals (not only physicians and lawyers, but also scientists, engineers, and academics) could establish their credentials and articulate masculine identities grounded in professional achievement and conduct. At the same time, growing bureaucratization in many areas of American life found expression in the establishment of national organizations, such as the American Bar Association (founded in 1878), which codified standards of conduct in their respective professions and provided grounding for emerging notions of professional identity. Previously established societies, such as the American Medical Association (established in 1847), assumed similar functions and benefited from the increasing power and influence of the professions in U.S. society. Two key Supreme Court decisions—*Bradley v. Illinois* (1872), in which the Supreme Court affirmed the rights of the states to exclude women from the professions, and *Dent v. West Virginia* (1888), in which the Supreme Court ruled that no individual had the right to practice a profession without necessary qualification, as determined by competent authorities—solidified the ideal of the true professional as a credentialed, highly trained male.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle-class professionals—who were overwhelmingly male—rose to social and cultural prominence as they sought to address social issues through scientific scrutiny, the application of dispassionate expertise, and organization. The new cultural authority and status of the male professional was well illustrated in Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (1888). Bellamy's ideal society, organized on the foundation of professional, technocratic expertise, was also a thoroughly masculine society based on gender segregation. Women do have voice and power in the novel, yet only in regard to expressly female concerns. In Bellamy's utopia, and in reality, the professions helped to create an integrated national culture predicated on a masculine matrix of professional values. His vision resonated powerfully at a time when many men felt that urbanization, industrialization, and bureaucratization had undermined traditional bases of masculine power and destabilized the meaning of manhood.

The first half of the twentieth century was a golden age for the professions and for professionals. Progressive Era reforms, which aimed to cure social ills through technocratic efficiency, emphasized the necessity of professional expertise and planning.

By the 1910s and 1920s, public intellectuals such as Walter Lippmann and Herbert Croly argued that the problems of modern society were best addressed not through democratic processes, but through the leadership of professional male experts who would apply their dispassionate, technocratic knowledge to a wide array of social issues. Similarly, African-American activist W. E. B. Du Bois looked to a cadre of black professionals he called the “talented tenth” to resolve the particular issues confronting African Americans.

While visions of a technocratic elite failed to materialize, the New Deal and World War II gave a renewed boost to the role, power, and masculine authority of professionals. Under the New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his “brain trust” of mostly male academics, intellectuals, and other professional experts expanded the administrative and regulatory capacities of the U.S. government, extending its reach into new realms. Wartime planning as a result of the U.S. entry into World War II in 1941 further increased the needs for professionals and their specialized expertise, and the association of their efforts with national power and eventual victory greatly enhanced the public image of professionals as paragons of manliness.

### Gender and Professionalism since World War II

During the post–World War II period, professionalism and its association with manhood have been reinforced in some ways and challenged in others. During the 1950s, some critics questioned the desirability of a society led by a middle-class professional elite, worrying that the impersonal nature of American bureaucratic structures threatened masculinity by reducing male professionals to bland conformists. These concerns were exemplified by C. Wright Mills in *White Collar* (1951) and *The Power Elite* (1956), and by William H. Whyte in *The Organization Man* (1956). At the same time, however, the postwar period witnessed a widening reach of professional codes in American occupational and social life, and the authority of the professional expert continued to significantly empower men.

Challenges to the ideal and authority of the male professional intensified during the 1960s. Both the critiques of professional elites and the continuing expansion of male professionals' power prompted a broad challenge to the ideal of the male expert by the counterculture, the New Left (heavily inspired by C. Wright Mills), and a resurging feminist movement. These new forces charged that the dispassionate professional male exacerbated rather than resolved the problems American society was facing. At the same time, legislation against sex discrimination—and the growing preference by

women for female obstetricians and gynecologists as issues of women's health assumed new public prominence—opened the professions to women at an unprecedented level.

Yet the power of the professional male persisted through the late twentieth century. Despite a growing presence of women in a wide variety of professions, some, such as engineering and science, remained so thoroughly dominated by men that many critics began to suggest that the educational process discouraged women from success in these fields beginning at an early age. Technological advances of the late twentieth century, such as the computer and information revolution, undermined any direct association between gender and professionalism, and the presence of personal computers in more and more households made society less dependent on professional experts by democratizing access to technology. Yet the growing cultural prominence of the “computer geek” (a figure typically imagined as male, and as possessing greater technological knowledge than most people) has enhanced the power of the male professional. In the early twenty-first century, it appears that the traditional association between masculinity and the power of professional expertise has endured.

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#### RELATED ENTRIES

Breadwinner Role; Bureaucratization; Business/Corporate America; Capitalism; Class; Consumerism; Crisis of Masculinity; Education; Gilded Age; Individualism; Industrialization; Medicine; Middle-Class Manhood; Ministry; Nationalism; Nuclear Family; Patriotism; Progressive Era; Self-Made Man; Sentimental Manhood; Sports; Suburbia; Technology; Urbanization; Work

—Thomas Winter