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Introduction: Within, Between, Beyond—A Multi-dimensional Approach to the Study of Professionalism and Social Change

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1   Professions in the Twenty-First Century: A Brief Introduction

Since the 1970s, professions have been subject to radical changes. The post-industrial transition initiated a new phase of capitalist development (see Touraine, 1969; Bell, 1973), stemming from its rupture from

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industrialism and the pre-eminence of the production of material goods. In this paradigm shift, knowledge became a strategic factor in production, and those who had control over it played an increasingly important role. Accordingly, the tertiarisation of the economy brought a rise in the number of expert occupations. Of these, the most significant groups were professions. This process, summed up by some authors as the rise of the knowledge society (see Machlup, 1962; Drucker, 1968; Bell, 1973), was associated with new configurations of the division of labour and increasing differences in economic and social conditions, all within the context of globalisation and technological change.

The outcome of this process is evidenced by three current trends that can be noted regarding expert labour and that have been accelerated by the recent crises: the financial crisis (2008–2014) and the COVID-19 crisis. First, the labour force has become more qualified. It can be observed that the crises primarily impacted low-skilled profiles, causing a decline in employment in manufacturing and construction, while employment in advanced business services grew, and a general upskilling of workers occurred—although how much this happened differed from one country to another (Gallie, 2013). Moreover, the crises intensified the process of outsourcing highly skilled services; these had once been provided in house by salaried workers and are now generally subcontracted out to specialised firms or independent professionals (see Leicht & Fennel, 2001). As a corollary, today, the number of people that define themselves as "professionals" is greater than ever. Second, conversely, not all expert occupations fit into typical professionalisation models, in the way that Reed describes them (2018, p. 307), which rely on "guild-like systems of occupational control and work organization ideologically anchored in autonomous regulation". Although this situation appears to fulfil Wilensky's (1964) prophecy, the upsurge in knowledge work has transformed what we mean by professionalism, challenging its very conceptualisation. Reed, again, spoke of "organisational/managerial" professions, which were the ones that adapted to these changes most successfully, versus "independent/collegiate" professions, which were challenged by the transformations produced (p. 307). Third, and more importantly, professional work no longer ensures prerogatives such as high earnings,

autonomy, or job security. On the contrary, the professional labour force has become diversified in terms of occupations, income, status, and power.

In the background, long-term processes of differentiation are still ongoing. Globalisation has blurred the boundaries between professional systems, and boundaryless careers are becoming the norm for professionals in certain fields. Consequently, practitioners who have been socialised in different, country-based professional systems now perform their activities side by side, while professional groups struggle to establish or restore the mechanisms of social closure that had once been ensured by national laws. The disruptive power of digital technologies has made the knowledge that had been previously possessed by professionals available to everyone, profoundly changing how this knowledge is produced, managed, and shared in society. Besides, it has created new cleavages among professionals, with its impact going beyond the issue of how professionals do their jobs and build relationships of trust—both with clients and society at large.

In brief, we are dealing with a puzzle which is composed of many pieces. In the attempt to put it together, however, the sociology of professions still seems to be dealing with its (theoretical) frame while struggling to identify (interpretive) patterns to link the (empirical) pieces to each other. Furthermore, the academic debate revolves around theories and concepts that were developed in the twentieth century, which can partly explain the above trends. As a matter of fact, the increasing complexity of social reality makes it necessary to seek out a systematic understanding of professions by considering the processes of professional, institutional, and social change as being interconnected. Despite the fact that categories such as "social closure", "professional project", "jurisdiction", and "professional logic" continue to exert an essential heuristic function, they seem to suffer from the absence of a comprehensive framework that is capable of combining different perspectives and guiding the analysis of professionalism within the new historical circumstances created by postindustrial society.

The processes of differentiation that are occurring and their outcomes in terms of heterogeneity can be used to decipher what is currently happening in the context of professional work with regard to individual professionals, the work settings in which they are situated, and professions

overall. Differentiation and heterogeneity are straightforward terms which imply a growing division of labour among professions and professionals (Bellini & Maestripieri, 2018; Parding et al., 2021). *Heterogeneity* involves professionals being increasingly diversified in terms of age, gender, social origins (class, ethnicity, migrant background), employment contract, type of organisation, and workplace, as well as their degree of professionalisation and the model of professionalism in question (established versus emerging professions). It has to do with the changing social bases of professions and with emerging patterns of professional practice and work organisation. *Differentiation* refers to two interconnected phenomena: *labour* differentiation, understood in the Durkheimian terms of the functional specialisation of occupations and individuals, in the Weberian terms of hierarchical stratification based on the unequal distribution of power between professional groups, or in the Marxian terms of renewed relations of exploitation; and *social* differentiation, understood in the Simmelian terms of growing individualisation and inequality among professionals. As such, it encompasses substantial divergences in structural positions, which call for novel ways to conceptualise, analyse, and interpret professional work.

The aim of this book is, first and foremost, to provide new conceptual tools to understand the changes occurring in professions and their interactions with society. The main contribution of this introduction lies in building an analytical framework by identifying three dimensions along which differentiation may be developed—*within*, *between*, and *beyond*—also referred to as the WBB model (Chap. 14). The edited collection of chapters proves its explanatory capacity by presenting notable research on various professional groups, in different countries, with distinct focuses and approaches, organised within a coherent three-pronged framework. This variety is the result of a deliberate choice that is aimed at highlighting similarities and differences across countries, professions, and issues—all englobed within the sociology of professions.

To sum up, the book's argument is that professions are becoming differentiated along multiple dimensions, all of which are worth exploring, possibly within a unitary framework. That said, the reader must be made aware that the three dimensions mentioned above are theoretical

constructs which refer to social phenomena that are artificially separated—as a conscious strategy—despite actually being interrelated.

Before presenting the analytical framework, it is nevertheless good practice to define the object of our study: professionalism in its interaction with social change. The following section thus introduces the fundamental concepts—profession and professionalism—and the main theoretical implications of their recent evolution. The subsequent section identifies the critical processes of change at play in contemporary societies, highlighting their impact on professionalism.

2   Professions and Professionalism: (Re)defining the Concepts

The theoretical background of this book consists of a relatively small set of fundamental concepts. However, their meanings and uses have changed and diversified over time, making it essential to describe how they have evolved and provide a proper definition of them. The reference here is primarily the notion of "professionalism", its significance, and its analytical uses. Scholars largely agree on the heuristic capacity of this concept, so much so that it has gained prominence over "profession" (see Torstendahl, 2005; Evetts, 2011). This shift of focus is not only a matter of conceptualisation; it is, at the same time, the cause and effect of a change of perspective within the sociology of professions due to a substantial transformation of society, in which *expert labour* and *profession* have become increasingly separated—with the latter understood in a Weberian sense as a historical construct of norms and rules.

The initial contributions to the discipline tended to see professions as distinct groups in the division of labour. The approach was the one labelled by Saks (2010, 2012) as "taxonomic": aimed at identifying and listing, with great care and diligence, the intrinsic and unique characteristics that distinguished professions from other occupations. In this sense, the work of Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) was pioneering. The emphasis was given to two specific traits: the possession of specialist competencies and the inclination to altruism (Greenwood, 1957; Wilensky,

1964), which allowed professionals to play a "positive" role in society. This approach found theoretical support in functionalism. From that perspective, exerting a "function" of great significance for society guaranteed practitioners appropriate rewards in terms of income and social prestige, thus allowing professions to attract the best talents (Goode, 1957; Barber, 1963).

At the heart of this approach was the implicit conception of professionalism as a "normative value system" (Evetts, 2003), which had its roots in Durkheim's (1890–1900) representation of professional groups as "moral communities", and promoted the idea of professionalism as a force for stability and freedom (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Marshall, 1939). In Parsons (1951), this idea was formulated rather comprehensively. In his view, professions were forces that contributed to maintaining social order in capitalist societies.

At the end of the 1950s, this approach became subject to increasing criticism, which would soon lead to it being abandoned, despite its continuing, implicit influence over the following decades. Hughes' (1958, 1963) argument was of particular significance since it was inherent to conceptualising professions. In his view, depicting professions as the only occupations to rely on competencies and ethics was misleading. Later, several works inspired by Marxist theory brought about a shift in viewpoint. With them, the approach to the study of professions entered a processual dimension, turning its attention to long-term trends, despite offering different understandings of change. Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1977), for instance, posited that the members of the "professional-managerial class" were playing the role of agents of the capitalist class, to whom the latter had transferred the tasks of expropriating production skills and controlling labour processes, putting them in opposition to the working class. An alternative view was that of Oppenheimer (1973), who maintained that the integration of professional workers into bureaucratic organisations necessarily implied the "proletarianisation" of their employment status and working conditions, as well as the rise of problems related to low-income levels and exposure to the risk of unemployment (see also McKinlay & Arches, 1985). From a less radical position, Navarro (1988) argued that it would be more appropriate to speak of a loss of professional autonomy. A further thesis was developed by Haug (1972, 1975)

concerning a supposed process of "de-professionalisation", indicating the loss of the distinctive qualities of professions, such as a monopoly of expert knowledge, unconditional trust in their service ethos and, again, professional autonomy.

The emergence of a neo-Weberian approach marked a paradigm shift. Saks (2010, 2016) outlined its distinguishing features and defined professions as institutionalised forms of closure, understood as "exclusionary" closure, a term borrowed from Parkin (1979). From this perspective, professionalisation is seen as a strategy to control the labour supply in a given occupational field, safeguarding its market value. The rise of neo-Weberianism also designated the assumption of a "negative" conception of professionalism as "ideology", indicating a hegemonic value system which relied on mechanisms of social control (Evetts, 2003). Among the most influential contributions that can be ascribed to this approach is the concept of "professional project", coined by Sarfatti Larson (1977) to describe the process by which an occupational group obtains monopolistic control of the labour market and, in so doing, achieves a project promoting social mobility. Abbott (1986) added an important point, drawing attention to conflicts over a "jurisdiction" in order to legitimise the monopoly of practice in a professional field. Along these interpretive lines, Freidson (2001) then developed the idea of professionalism as a "third logic" of organising the labour market, in contrast to (and preferable to) the market and bureaucracy; however, this third logic needs market closure to guarantee high-quality performance.

Neo-Weberian scholars transformed the notion of professionalism, already in use at the origins of the discipline, although with a generic, undetermined meaning, making it into a theoretical tool for social critique. In this sense, their contribution was extremely valuable. Thanks to them, professionalism and the other categories mentioned above permanently entered the conceptual toolbox of the sociologists of professions. That said, neo-Weberianism has shown its limits when called upon to explain the *processes* of differentiation that affect professions and their *outcomes* in terms of the increasing heterogeneity among professionals. These limits have revealed themselves to be intrinsic to the neo-Weberian approach, in that they are derived from the definition of a profession as an "institution" and place much emphasis on exclusionary practices, as

well as permanence instead of change. They make it necessary to begin any discussion by defining what a profession is and by determining who is included and who is excluded, in a kind of Sisyphean task.

In the second half of the 1990s, a need to codify the changes occurring in professional work pushed scholars to rethink professionalism. The changes in question can be inscribed within an overall process of "rationalisation" related to the promotion of an organisational-managerialist culture, which first affected the UK and North America (see Fournier, 1999; and, again, Evetts, 2003). In this regard, Hanlon (1996, 1998) reported the emergence of a new model, labelling it "commercialised" professionalism, which implies that professionals are increasingly dependent on the ability to generate profit for their clients; in so doing, he indicated a further shift of focus towards aspects such as responsibility and performance, and emphasised how it was increasingly important for professionals to possess entrepreneurial and managerial skills.

Academics have paid growing attention to the role of organisations—that is, large corporations and professional service firms—as employers of professionals. Evetts (2006) coined the expression "organisational" professionalism, in opposition to the traditional concept of "occupational" professionalism. Moreover, she redefined the notion of professionalism, arguing that both forms of professionalism can be better understood in terms of "discourse" (see Fournier, 1999). What has been called organisational professionalism has been conceptualised as a discourse developed in work organisations (rather than occupational groups), which incorporates the principle of hierarchy (rather than collegiate authority), involves the standardisation of work processes and the exercise of managerialist control (rather than relationships of trust with the employers/clients), and relies on externalised forms of regulation and accountability measures (rather than self-regulation).

Some further remarks should be made concerning the role of organisations. They have been indicated as the "fifth actor" in the regulation of professions (Muzio et al., 2011), in addition to professionals, clients, states, and universities (the actors formerly identified by Burrage & Torstendahl, 1990). A thesis that a new paradigm was emerging gained currency, one that went beyond the conception of professionalism as a third logic. Among its promoters was Noordegraaf (2007), who devised

the concept of "hybrid" professionalism, aiming to reinforce the idea of professionalism in changeable organisational contexts. According to this author, this is a reaction to an attack on classic professions that can be described by the expression "professionalism under pressure". In relation to this, the idea of a threat of de-professionalisation emerged once more, to which professions reacted by searching for new sources of identity within organisations (see Dent & Whitehead, 2002). This change involved the reorganisation, restratification, and relocation of professional work within occupational fields that were increasingly heterogeneous and fragmented (Noordegraaf, 2016). Others have referred to a thesis of hybridisation. Among them, Faulconbridge and Muzio (2007) offered a different way of understanding the phenomenon, arguing that going back to the hypothesis of de-professionalisation could lead to the depiction of professions as "passive victims", and could undervalue their capacity to reach leading positions within organisations. In this sense, we are faced with a new model of organisational professionalism, which implies that even collegiate professions use organisational structures and principles to promote their professional projects and to gain control of the strategic resources of large private companies (Evetts, 2006).

We will return to this point in the next paragraph. What is worth noting here is that the redirecting of attention from professions to professionalism and the reconceptualisation of the notion of professionalism as discourse have given the discipline new life, allowing the changing social reality to be interpreted more effectively. Evetts (2006), again, made a decisive contribution to developing this conception. In her words, the *discourse of professionalism* refers to "the ways in which occupational and professional workers themselves are accepting, incorporating and accommodating the idea of 'profession' and particularly 'professionalism' in their work" (p. 139). As such, it is used both as a "disciplinary" mechanism aimed at controlling professional practice within organisations and as a mechanism for controlling work within occupational groups. In this way, it can be seen as a fully-fledged means of social control.

Other authors have proposed variations on the theme, depending on the level and focus of the analysis. The most radical position was that of Watson (2002), who suggested considering the possibility of abandoning the concepts of profession and professionalism, instead using occupation

as an analytical category and looking at "professional talk" as a topic. In his view, the notion of profession is ambiguous since it relies on the assumption of being "special" compared to other occupations. Furthermore, he sees professionalism as a "bandwagon" idea, namely a vehicle used by members of occupations to further or defend their interests. Both terms are conceptualised as "discursive resources" that are strongly connected to "occupational mobilisation". The author clarified that professional talk is one of several discourses that are typical of contemporary culture and that we can draw upon several different discourses of professionalism. He also offered a definition of *discourse* as a set of "interconnected concepts, expressions, and statements that constitute a way of talking and writing about an aspect of the world, thereby framing and influencing how people understand and act with regard to that aspect of the world" (p. 100)—that is, resources that social actors use to pursue their purposes rather than analytical tools in the hands of social scientists. This approach is nevertheless more attuned to a macro level of analysis, centred on the role that social actors play in the construction of reality.

Here, it is helpful to make a distinction between "discourse" and "rhetoric" to gain a clear view of the problem and consider the possible implications for research. As Suddaby and Viale (2011, p. 434) pointed out, "rhetoric is distinct from, but dependent upon, discourse". The latter, the authors explained, operates at the macro level, reflecting positions of power within society and not associated with the agency of individuals, whereas the former operates at the lower levels and is more "agentic" (see also Suddaby, 2010). Indeed, at the micro level, different agent-based approaches have been developed that draw attention to the use of rhetorical devices as means of influence. Neo-institutionalism has provided a theoretical basis for this line of research, with the focus being on the strategic use of rhetoric "to influence the direction and pace of [institutional] change, but also to legitimate or delegitimate the acceptance of a particular programme of change" (Suddaby & Viale, 2011, p. 434). As such, rhetoric is an active element in the transformative process called *institutional work*, namely "the creation, maintenance and transformation of institutions" (p. 424). Professionals are "institutional agents" (see Scott, 2008; and, more recently, Muzio et al., 2013). In the words of

Suddaby and Viale (2011, p. 435), again, "language is a crucial weapon […] and professionals are skilled rhetoricians".

Another stream of literature, starting from different theoretical premises, was inspired by Abbott's work, then concentrated on discursive strategies and practices as the underlying mechanisms of the *boundary work* at the basis of jurisdictional conflicts (see, for instance, Bucher et al., 2016; for a broader overview, see Heusinkveld et al., 2018). Here, the aim was to explain how discursive resources contribute to redefining occupational jurisdictions and inter-occupational relationships, above all in the cases of "emerging" professions. With this term, we mean "those professional activities that are in the process of professionalization but are yet to be recognized as professional by public regulation, although their practitioners lay claim to professionalism" (Maestripieri & Cucca, 2018, p. 365).

Generally, we agree with Evetts (2006, p. 141) that focusing on the discourse of professionalism "offers some new directions and areas of interest for sociologists of professional groups". A point to make here is that *discourse,* in the strict sense, refers to boundary work, a type of cognitive work that affects the relationships between either professions or professional groups, thus producing its direct effects at the macro level. Instead, *rhetoric* refers to types of "self-reflective" cognitive work conducted individually by professionals and that produce their effects at the micro level, although they are likely to also influence the macro level. The latter is linked to identity work, which occurs in the context of subjectivity, although it is reconducted to a coherent epistemic framework; hence, it contributes to consolidating or even giving rise to a professional project. It also involves institutional work carried out by professionals in organisational contexts and produces institutional change (Muzio et al., 2013).

Despite conceptual specificities, however, the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, rhetoric can always be traced to a general discourse of professionalism. What is more, all these types of cognitive work are interrelated with processes of change occurring at different levels. Indeed, they generate change at the *professional*, *institutional*, and *societal* levels. In turn, they are influenced by broader processes of change, which should induce us to go beyond the conception of macrophenomena as being "micro-founded" (see Powell & Colyvas, 2008), and

to focus on the "interactions" between macro-phenomena and micro-processes (on this idea, see Wright, 1997).

In conclusion, we agree that the conception of professionalism as a discursive practice is a more functional way of studying professions in the context of social change, which implies the differentiation of professions themselves and, as an outcome, increasing heterogeneity among professionals. In particular, it seems more effective in explaining the redefinition of professional boundaries in light of the emergence of new forms of professionalism. The conceptualisation work we have conducted has nevertheless revealed the existence of notional variants of the idea of discourse. This book adopts an open approach, pragmatically trying to take advantage of the shades of meaning and their analytical uses. This is coherent with the aim of investigating differentiation from multiple angles while adopting a "micro-macro" approach.

3   Critical Processes of Change

In an increasingly complex social reality, the research agenda of the sociology of professions has shifted its focus onto three large-scale processes of change—the *post-industrial transition*, *globalisation*, and *digitalisation*—that are deemed critical due to their impact on professionalism. These processes have a pervasive and bivalent nature, and present various opportunities and challenges. Here follows a discussion of their empirical implications.

3.1   The Post-Industrial Transition

This concept has gained ground in the social sciences to explain the progressive change in the composition of the labour force that began in advanced capitalist economies in the early 1970s. From then onwards, employment in manufacturing began to gradually lose ground in favour of services, owing to a combination of the outsourcing of business activities, the delocalisation of production, and a substantial change in the types of goods produced (from material to immaterial). This process was

endogenous to the productive sphere, but its effects permeated society. Tertiarisation gave a central role to those capable of producing and managing knowledge. Professionals belonging to this category rapidly increased in number.

An important consequence was that women—who benefitted the most from the democratisation of education—entered the post-industrial labour markets massively, obtaining positions that required relational and knowledge skills instead of the physical strength needed for producing material goods. By virtue of their educational performance, they began to compete successfully to access professions. An increasing number of female professionals entered male-dominated professional groups, although this process occurred at the cost of their marginalisation in subaltern positions or niches considered suitable for feminine skills (e.g., paediatrics or divorce law). The greater accessibility of education also allowed more working-class people to acquire the knowledge and skills required to perform expert labour.

A further consequence was the erosion of salaried employment. Services, contrary to manufacturing, rely on target-oriented workflows, which do not necessarily require the standardisation of working schedules. The need for service labour began to change on the basis of demand from clients in a way that was far less predictable than in the past. Employers thus asked for more flexible organisation of work. Since the 1980s, governments have pursued deregulation in employment contracts in almost all capitalist countries. The outcome has been a progressive loss of the pre-eminence of "standard", that is, permanent, full-time dependent employment, in favour of "non-standard" jobs. Fixed-term, part-time contracts and self-employment started becoming the norm among professionals.

The feminisation of labour markets and the de-standardisation of employment augmented the heterogeneity of the professional labour force. These days, professionals are more diverse: they include people that belong to different social groups (more women and people from the working classes); in addition, different professionals might perform the same job in the same organisation but under different employment statuses.

3.2   Globalisation

With this term, social scientists refer to the growing integration of economic, social, and cultural systems across the globe. In the context of our argument, a few points should be stressed. First, globalisation affects all dimensions of social life, which are closely intertwined. Second, the economic dimension is central but must be seen in the light of its interconnections with all the other dimensions. Third, businesses are key global players, proactively fostering processes of "transnationalisation", which, for instance, implies the exercise of pressure to obtain changes in state legal regulations. As such, globalisation has called into question the heuristic capacity of monolithic, "Western-centric" theories of professionalism.

Broadly speaking, globalisation has facilitated the mobility of products, services, and workers across countries in different regions around the world. On the other hand, it has implied an international division of labour between advanced capitalist countries, which mainly produce knowledge, and recently industrialised countries, where the production of material goods has been delocalised. Besides, it has caused the competition among companies and workers to move to the global scale and has intensified it. Specifically, the growing number of professionals and the new ways of embodying professionalism in developing countries are leading to a new division of labour between the Global North and the Global South. The composition of the labour force and the size of professional service firms are also changing rapidly (Dent et al., 2016; Saks & Muzio, 2018). Furthermore, it is easier for professionals to travel outside their countries of origin to provide professional services: not only because services are supplied by multinational corporations that dominate the markets at home and abroad (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011), but also because individual careers are becoming boundaryless and globally mobile (Cohen & Mallon, 1999). Accordingly, it is common for practitioners from different countries to work side by side within the same global professional service firm. In this situation, professional practice is carried out under different combinations of state regulations and socio-cultural norms. New "local" ways of interpreting professionalism are also emerging;

indeed, regulative inputs can have different outcomes when transferred from one country to another. Moreover, there is more demand for professionals to work internationally, and some have more possibilities than others to move in other countries, depending on their (economic, cultural, and social) capital: their family circumstances, language skills, and, not least, whether they are women, which makes them less able to move or commute long distance.

3.3   Digitalisation

Technological change involving how knowledge is produced, managed, and stored has been summed up under the term digitalisation. The adoption of information technology and the diffusion of the Internet are pervasive phenomena that affect professionals and clients, without exception and regardless of whether they want it or are conscious of it. This has occurred in two ways. On the one hand, digitalisation has created new channels to express the demand for professional services. On the other hand, it has offered professionals new instruments to respond to this demand for professional services in a prompt and economical manner; in turn, this demand has become more sophisticated and sensitive to price variations. Digital technologies have also changed how expert knowledge is produced and conveyed, impacting the capacity of professional groups to control labour markets (a critical aspect already stressed by Sarfatti Larson, 1977) and altering the power balances between professionals and clients (as described by Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985). In this sense, they have made esoteric knowledge more easily accessible.

Digitalisation exposes professional workers to a process of polarisation between "good" and "bad" jobs, with the consequence of putting them, or some of them at least, in precarious work situations. As a matter of fact, the topic of how technological change interacts with socio-professional stratification principles is unexplored. Digital technologies may reproduce or even increase the inequalities between those who have the resources to invest in innovation or have the capacity to keep up with technological advancements and those who do not. Then again, they offer professionals "at the margins" (see Butler et al., 2012) new

opportunities to promote their businesses or directly sell services and, therefore, to reach a wider audience in an economical way. This aspect reveals the ambivalence of digitalisation in that it brings about the "know-how" allowing experts to reassert their "dominance" over clients as well as over marginal professionals and, at the same time, it opens up the field for new occupational figures. As such, it provides fertile ground for social conflict and offers new instruments in the fight for social rights in a sector that is typically impervious to collective action.

Among "disruptive" technologies (Christensen, 1997)—that is, innovative technologies that make it possible to offer low-cost services and activate a latent demand for services—*online work platforms* take the outsourcing trend to the extreme. Clients can now hire experts for one-off, simple tasks without even knowing who they are. Platforms, as Farrell and Greig (2016, p. 2) note, "have created a new marketplace for work by unbundling a job into discrete tasks and directly connecting individual sellers with consumers". As these authors have further explained, "these flexible, highly accessible opportunities to work have the potential to help people buffer against income and expense shocks"; on the other hand, they offer "fewer worker protections than traditional work arrangements" (p. 2). These organisations are primarily multinational companies operating on a global scale.

3.4   Professions and Society

The above processes have combined to bring about the breach of the "social contract" between professions and society, something which had implied high rewards in terms of income and prestige in exchange for the monopolistic exercise of functions that had great importance for society itself. They have operated by bypassing state-centred professional systems and by penetrating professional groups to produce their most significant effects on professionals themselves. Their most visible expression is the proliferation of what actually fits into the category of professions and, among them, the differentiation of professional groups and figures. At present, professions can hardly be considered to form homogeneous and cohesive groups, something which calls into question the feasibility of

pursuing solid professional projects. As a direct consequence, professionals are affected by growing inequalities. These phenomena affect both traditional and emerging professions. They contribute to the loss of professional power of the former, while, in the case of the latter, the dominance of the market logic and the increasing competition to which professionals are exposed have given rise to processes of marginalisation (Butler et al., 2012). Overall, these processes of differentiation have produced increasing heterogeneity.

As already stated, we argue that the heterogeneity of professions derives from multiple processes of differentiation and can be better understood by using a multi-dimensional analytical framework. The following paragraph gives operative definitions of the dimensions along which differentiation develops.

4   A Three-Pronged Analytical Framework

Given the above theoretical premises, three dimensions can be identified that delineate the loci of the differentiation of professions and professional groups and account for the increasing heterogeneity that is occurring among professionals, brought about by large-scale processes of change. The three dimensions through which we study differentiation—within, between, and beyond—have a great capacity to organise thoughts and ideas along—metaphorically—spatial lines. Indeed, they refer to the distance between the constitutive components of a profession (*within*), the distance that separates different and sometimes competing professional groups (*between*), and the distance that divides professionals and society at large (*beyond*). In this framework, the term "distance" has a dual meaning, both "relational" and "processual", as it implies the existence of connections of variable lengths between two or more elements: the idea it recalls is that the greater the distance, the more different individuals are from each other, and the less homogeneous, cohesive, and influential the groups. Defined in this way, distance may refer to professions, professional groups, or professionals. Its "unit of measurement" identifies the analytical perspective; for instance, it may focus on job stability and security, earned income, social prestige, or political power,

depending on the particular situation, which might be influenced by objective factors, such as gender, class, ethnic origins or migrant background, and age.

The spatial metaphor gives us an idea of the ambiguity of the relationship between professionals and society. On the one hand, the more distant professionals are from society—in the sense that they are bearers of esoteric, inaccessible knowledge, which is indispensable for the functioning of society itself—the more likely they are to be appropriately rewarded for their work. On the other hand, the more distant they are in terms of their participation in social life, the less likely they are to have a significant impact on social change.

Although the three dimensions are irreducible, they can be analytically distinguished in order to present them to the reader.

4.1   The Within Dimension

The first dimension of analysis has to do with the processes that contribute to differentiating professionals *within* a given profession. The rise of post-industrial society has brought about higher skill levels in the labour force as well as increased diversity and mobility. Barriers to entry into the professions, in many cases, have ceased to exist or are less rigid than before. People from disadvantaged groups, such as women or people from working-class backgrounds, have entered the professions in great numbers, modifying their social structure. Furthermore, technological change, in the form of digitalisation, has led to a further opening up of professional labour markets: nowadays, practitioners only need a personal computer and easy-to-use software to compete on the market. However, openness does not necessarily imply equal opportunities. That is, access does not guarantee favourable employment terms and working conditions.

On the contrary, there is a rising heterogeneity in how professional work is contracted out, which increases the degree of insecurity of expert labour (Murgia et al., 2016). Being on the market, per se, is not sufficient to ensure adequate income levels or access to welfare (Maestripieri & Cucca, 2018). And not all practitioners within a profession—not even

when it is an established one, such as law (see Alacevich et al., 2017)—have equal status in their community of peers. What is more, deregulation has eroded the capacity of professional groups to secure their status. Professions are no longer immune to social inequalities or power struggles (Butler et al., 2012).

"Differentiation within", it should be noted, can occur over time when regulation intervenes to loosen the boundaries of a professional field or to modify the terms through which social closure is put into practice. In this sense, institutional change can be seen as a form of change which shapes professionalism *from within*.

4.2   The Between Dimension

A critical feature that scholars have taken into consideration when distinguishing professions from occupations is the capacity of specific occupational groups to obtain social recognition and control membership to their associations (Johnson, 1972; Freidson, 1994); this guarantees their members stable and remunerative jobs by limiting the number of acknowledged practitioners and, in so doing, keeps internal competition at bay. This takes us to the second dimension, which is linked to the relationships *between* professions and other occupations and *between* professional groups themselves. The latter are characterised by enjoying different degrees of protection against market risks; this depends on public regulation but also on the capacity of professionals to organise collectively and exert control or influence over a specific area of expertise (Butler et al., 2012).

This is a typical neo-Weberian analytical perspective, focusing on the dynamics of professional power (Johnson, 1972) and the mechanisms of exclusionary closure (Parkin, 1979; Macdonald, 1995), which operate against the backdrop of interactive relationships between contiguous occupational jurisdictions (Abbott, 1988) and determine the success or failure of a professional project (Sarfatti Larson, 1977). From this viewpoint, professions are depicted as hierarchically differentiated groups, and the analysis is centred on the inequalities between professional groups (Saks, 2015).

If we assume that professional groups are situated both historically and locally—either enabled or constrained by country-based professional systems and embedded in institutional and socio-cultural contexts—it seems convenient to extend the discourse on "differentiation between" to include the rising inequalities between professionals who belong to the same professional group but to different professional systems, which have been put under pressure by globalisation. As already noticed, globalisation has manifested itself in professionals becoming increasingly mobile and in the rise of boundaryless careers, but also—and more importantly—in the growing role of global professional service firms supplying services in different countries, across the borders that exist between country-based professional systems, hence putting national regulations and cultures to the test. At the same time, due to the rising number of professionals in developing countries, locally specific ways of embodying professionalism are emerging that increase the differentiation of professional standards.

4.3   The Beyond Dimension

The third dimension is concerned with what lies *beyond* professionalism. The term "beyond", it is worth noting, does not mean denying the value of professionalism as a heuristic category, nor does it indicate a transition to any form of post-professional society. On the contrary, it implies assuming the persisting significance of professionalism as a conceptual tool that can be used to analyse and interpret social change. Furthermore, it shifts the focus of the academic discourse from professionalism in the strict sense to the relationship between expert labour and society: namely, to examine how social change influences professionalism and, from the opposing point of view, the implications of professional change for society.

This aspect relates to the forms of social control that have already been enumerated by Goode (1957), particularly the "indirect" control exerted by society on professionals through clients' choices. The same phenomenon can be observed from a different perspective, as an element of power in the "social exchange" between professionals and clients, understood as

the autonomy of the former from the latter (Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985). In this case, the focus is on the changing relationship between professionals and clients, the related effects on relationships of trust, and the dynamics of social recognition. Indeed, so far, the academic debate has not been able to fully consider the extent to which professionalism has changed because of the decline in public recognition of the—economic and social—value of professional work.

An alternative approach to the problem is to look at the role played by professionals in society, beyond the boundaries of their ordinary activity, by focusing on their—actual or potential—contributions to the processes of change (see Bellini, 2014).

In this regard, Scott (2010) called attention to the critical role played by professionals in legitimising new institutional arrangements. The author referred to Berger and Luckmann (1966) to argue that "institutionalisation", as a growing set of new organisational forms or practices, is a gradual process, one that implies the production of meanings and their integration into existing beliefs and values in a given field. He affirmed that, as the process evolves, innovators lose control and professional actors appear that are specialised in the construction and management of cultural, normative, and regulatory frameworks. In the words of Scott (2008, p. 220), professionals are the "lords of the dance", namely "choreographers" of the "dances of individuals and organizations", defining, interpreting, and applying beliefs, norms, and rules, thus giving meaning and stability to social life.

The focus mentioned above is on the role played by individual actors as "institutional agents" in influencing the life of complex organisations from the inside and the outside (see also Muzio et al., 2013). A further field of analysis should be examined to assess the role of professionals and professions in civil society. This could be done in two ways: by looking at professionals' "civic engagement" and "political activism" in the context of their multiple roles while concentrating on their *individual* contributions to social change (Flam, 2019); or by relating to the issue of "participation", which is more properly linked to *collective* action. As argued elsewhere (see Bellini & Maestripieri, 2018), research on the sociology of professions generally focuses on the *within* or the *between* dimensions; not many contributions take the dynamics occurring *beyond* professions

as their focal point of analysis, although this dimension is often latently present since it is inherent to the discourse of professionalism. The latter tends to emphasise the impact of professionalism on society as a basis for claiming public recognition and adequate rewards in the social exchange with society itself.

That said, the beyond dimension may be the domain in which a meta-reflection is taking place on the very nature of professionalism. Noordegraaf's (2020, p. 209) idea of "connective" professionalism has added new fuel to this debate (for a critical appraisal of this concept, see Adams et al., 2020a, 2020b; Alvehus et al., 2021; Faulconbridge et al., 2021; Noordegraaf & Brock, 2021). With it, the author calls for "a move *beyond hybridity*". In his words, "apart from 'organizing' aspects, within organizational settings, professional acts can be related to the outside world, including external influences and pressures" (p. 210). Therefore, "professionalism becomes meaningful in relation to clients, stakeholders, and actors, in wider service systems and societal settings" (p. 210). As Noordegraaf himself argues, "professionalism is not residing 'in' professionals but happens in-between professional action […] and the outside world" (p. 218).

4.4   The WBB Model

Each of the three dimensions maintains its specific heuristic capacity. At the same time, taken together, the dimensions allow us to frame the processes and outcomes of change that affect professions and society as a whole, providing a vivid representation of current social reality. In the conclusions of the book (Chap. 14), we will show how the three dimensions taken together could offer new inputs to the study of professionalism in contemporary society.

5 Differentiation in Action: An Overview

5.1 The Scope of the Book

The collection of chapters in this book aims to provide evidence that the analytical framework presented above is capable of reading the changes to professions that are being brought about by processes of differentiation. The studies contained here apply this framework across different geographical contexts, examining different professional groups, and inspired by different approaches and traditions in the study of professions and professionalism.

We consider the three dimensions (within-between-beyond) as "irreducible", meaning that their influence and effects are mutually interrelated; we have separated them for analytical clarity alone, following Beckert's (2010) model. For this reason, we asked the book contributors to pick one of the three dimensions as their central analytical axis while leaving the other two in the background. The table of contents is in line with this purpose: indeed, the chapters are not grouped together on the basis of the countries or professions studied but on the analytical dimension applied.

The outcome of this exercise is a detailed picture of the ongoing research that is taking place worldwide in the field of professions, with each contribution focusing on an issue related to the processes of change described previously.

5.2 An Outline of the Chapters

Part I collects the contributions that explore the processes of differentiation *within* professions. This group of chapters presents empirical cases and shows how an increasing differentiation of professionals is taking place in relation to employment situations, working conditions, opportunities for career development, and, more generally, socio-professional status, thematised in terms of job instability, unequal opportunities, and

gendered segmentation. Extensive research has been dedicated to investigating corporate professionalism, while less attention has been given to precarious forms of employment, including those related to self-employment and platform work. The latter are growing fast, especially among the weakest members of professional groups: women, people from working-class backgrounds, and migrant professionals.

In detail, Chap. 2, by Pierre Bataille, Nicky Le Feuvre, and Marie Sautier, focuses on the influence exerted by employment frameworks on the definition of professionalism. The authors adopt an employment-based approach to studying the differentiation occurring within academia in Switzerland. Specifically, three ideal types of academics are identified: the "researcher", the "teacher", and the "manager". This typology is employed to explain the different individual orientations towards the process of managerialisation within universities and the related increasingly precarious nature of academic labour.

Chapter 3, by Debby Bonnin, assesses the consequences of globalisation and the disruptive effects of the use of Computer-Aided Design (CAD) technologies on the textile design profession. In South Africa, where the study is based, textile designers have never developed "pure" professionalism. Good jobs and "situated" professionalism, as defined by Noordegraaf (2007), had characterised the sector until the 1990s, when most textile designers were employed in large companies as salaried workers. Since then, the combined effect of the integration of the textile industry into the global economy, market deregulation, and the introduction of new technologies has resulted in the rise in internal competition among designers, implying a deterioration in employment and working conditions, increasingly characterised by freelancing, contract work, and, generally speaking, a loss of professional autonomy.

Chapter 4, by Valeria Insarauto, Isabel Boni-Le Goff, Grégoire Mallard, Eléonore Lépinard, and Nicky Le Feuvre, examines how the restructuring of firms and new organisational forms in the legal professions pressure women to conform to male working patterns and career profiles. The authors posit that new transnational patterns of professional work based on global professional standards favour organisational logics, practices, and strategies, reinforcing the established male-centred model of professionalism. However, while most studies related to the gendered

segmentation of the legal professions have focused on the macro-processes of work organisation, this chapter concentrates on the micro level, investigating individual work experiences of early-career lawyers in two countries, France and Switzerland.

Chapter 5, by Davide Arcidiacono, Ivana Pais, and Giorgio Piccitto, analyses how digital platforms shape professionalism in four regulated fields in Italy: law, journalism, psychology, and architecture. Technologies are simultaneously a mirror of and a mechanism for reinforcing the existing logics of division and organisation of labour. The authors show that the expansion of work platforms has been made possible by the erosion of the privileged position of professionals in the labour market. They also show how platforms might be appropriate marketplaces for weaker professionals who have been marginalised or excluded from the primary professional labour market, since they aim to respond promptly and economically to the demand for simple and repetitive tasks.

Chapter 6, by Karolina Parding and Anna Jansson, discusses how the current regulation of professional work impacts professionals' learning conditions. To do so, it focuses on the cases of nurses and teachers in Sweden: the former as temporary agency workers; the latter as being divided between various public and non-public realms. The two cases reveal the emergence of different employment patterns for professionals working in private and public environments, often side by side in the same workplace. The research findings show how policy reforms, solely or partially addressed to the public sector, amplify the differentiation of welfare-sector professionals' learning conditions. The authors argue that these changes are driving a differentiation within professions, resulting in unequal opportunities for learning and career development.

Part II focuses on the processes of differentiation *between* professional groups, which belong either to different professions within the same professional system or even to the same profession but in different professional systems. The following chapters address very different cases, which nevertheless develop against a common background marked by marketisation and globalisation. Professions rely increasingly on the market and organisations as the loci of professional dominance: hybridisation is key to this and is subject to a fierce debate in the field. In addition, the mobility of professionals has increased: multinational corporations,

transnational projects, and boundaryless careers challenge state regulation, giving rise to the need for further regulation efforts across different localities. A contradiction emerges between *country-based* systems of professions and *globalised* markets of professional services. This contradiction calls into question professional power and the related capacity to pressure regulatory systems that had once been presided by professional bodies.

Chapter 7, by Jean-Luc Bédard, Marta Massana, and Christophe Groulx, explores the movements of foreign-trained professionals across country borders and professional jurisdictions. The authors take the cases of doctors and engineers moving to Canada to compare a profession governed by public institutions (medicine) with one dominated by private organisations (engineering). The public-private distinction creates different spaces for socio-professional integration within and around these regulated professions. The analysis draws on Abbott's (1988) theory of professions, particularly regarding jurisdictional conflicts within and between professional groups.

Chapter 8, by Marta Choroszewicz, gives evidence of how lawyers in Finland, French Canada, and Poland use knowledge as a resource in the struggle for status and power in the market, where institutional mechanisms are less powerful in creating shelters for professionals. The author borrows Freidson's (1986, 2001) definition of professionalism as a mode of organisation of the labour market based on the recognition of professionals' knowledge and expertise and argues that, even though professionals are losing autonomy and influence as a collective, they strategically use different forms of professionalism in their everyday micro-practices to renegotiate their status. Her work employs a comparative perspective across countries by giving evidence on a single profession—law—in different institutional contexts.

Chapter 9, by Lluís Parcerisa, Antoni Verger, Marcel Pagès, and Natalie Browes, analyses the consequences of the encroachment of private-sector values (such as managerialism and performance orientation) into the public domain of education. In particular, by conducting a systematic literature review, the authors aim to evaluate the impact of test-based accountability on teacher professionalism. For this purpose, they compare two different institutional settings: "high-stakes" systems, in which students' test results are often tied to rewards and sanctions for the school,

the head teacher, and/or teachers; and "low-stakes" systems, where there are no administrative consequences, but there exists a strong perception that the schools' and/or teachers' reputations are at risk. The focus on the institutional context helps delineate the impact that different models of external evaluation have on teachers' performance and their capacity to sustain coherent professionalism across different environments.

Chapter 10, by Silvia Lucciarini and Valeria Pulignano, focuses on how contemporary creative professional work challenges traditional models of professionalism. The professionalism that creative workers claim to embody, in fact, is neither legally recognised nor formally certified; as such, it leaves them at the mercy of the market, with no chance of gaining a monopoly of the labour market. The chapter analyses emerging forms of professional closure in Italy, concentrating on the *boundary work* performed by multi-professional, mutual aid cooperatives of creative workers such as photographers, video makers, and lighting and sound technicians.

Part III discusses the changing role of professionals in society, hence going *beyond* professions. Here, a significant, cross-cutting theoretical perspective is applied to the discourse on marketisation, which makes professionals dependent on clients' choices. Two supplemental perspectives are used to look at professionals as actors of change: the perspective emphasising their role as *institutional agents*, who influence the life of complex organisations either from the inside or from the outside, and another perspective—less diffused among scholars in the sociology of professions—which identifies them as key players in political and social movements. The contributions selected deal with these topics from different, innovative perspectives, which include, for instance, looking at how client organisations influence the professionalisation of emerging professions. An original insight is also provided into the relationship between professions and society, focusing on professionals' activism.

Chapter 11, by Tracey Adams, investigates the forces challenging, altering, or even undermining professional self-regulation in two Canadian provinces. Taking on a theoretical perspective derived from Abbott (1988, 2005), the author considers professions and states as *linked ecologies* and, therefore, attempts to understand how different institutions combine to shape regulatory outcomes. The chapter is also informed by

Weber's theories of social action and the state, and identifies stakeholders' concerns and explains how their values, interests, and actions influence regulatory trends over time.

Chapter 12, by Joris Gjata, Matthew Rowe, and Shawhin Roudbari, calls attention to the work professionals perform when they engage beyond their fields of practice, such as through humanitarian or other kinds of social justice projects. The authors refer to two major streams of research in the sociology of professions: once again, Abbott's (2005) *linked ecology* perspective; and also the neo-institutional approach, which sees professionals as agents of institutional change. Their theoretical framework draws upon Abbott's concepts of "hinge" and "avatar" to theorise the practices through which professionals extend their expertise into new social domains. The analysis then focuses on the actions of a group of professionals of the built environment in the United States—architects—who engage in activism, advocacy, and social justice efforts, with specific attention paid to the relationship of this work with their formal professional organisations. The findings show that professional movements may lead to a new type of hybrid professionalism and a new actor, the "activist professional".

Chapter 13, by Paola Sedda and Oihana Husson, deals with social media influencers, a case of *hybrid professionalism* in which quantitative performance criteria prescribed by platforms are combined with creative logic and collective action. The chapter analyses how influencers participate in redefining professionalism and professional practices in the marketing and communication fields, despite not necessarily engaging in actual processes of institutionalisation. Indeed, the influence they exert in their communities mainly derives from their differentiation from institutional actors. The authors thus examine professionals as actors of change who are constantly reframing their discourse on "professionalism" on the basis of public demands and the emergence of new political and societal issues.

The conclusions (Chap. 14) aim to put the pieces of the puzzle together by identifying theoretical links and isolating empirical regularities and specificities within the various contributions along the lines of the three-pronged analytical framework. This approach draws inspiration from Merton's (1949) teachings about *middle-range theories*. Professions are

heterogeneous, multifaceted, and variable, and depend on historical and contextual contingencies. As such, they can be studied effectively by referring to theories that "deal with delimited aspects of social phenomena", based on "minor" hypotheses which can be verified through limited empirical observations and, in so doing, they can contribute to the development of a "unified theory" (pp. 39–40).

6 Taking Up the Challenge

Professions are changing radically because the society in which professionals live and work has undergone a profound transformation. The current phase in which capitalist societies find themselves lends a new centrality to expert knowledge. Professionals are at the heart of this change because of their privileged role in the production and management of knowledge. Their renewed importance is associated with changes in the nature of professions. At the same time, they are becoming increasingly differentiated, so much so that the concept of professionalism itself, in the way it is understood in the academic debate, is being called into question. For this reason, we need to find new conceptual lenses through which we look at professions, as this allows us to effectively understand the changing social reality in which professionals and professional groups are embedded.

Heterogeneity is the outcome of multiple processes of differentiation, which have been described in this introduction. These processes of differentiation are not neutral in defining the puzzle we are dealing with when confronting the current reality of professionalism.

We have identified three analytical dimensions to accomplish this complex and challenging task: within, between, and beyond. We have combined these "irreducible" dimensions to form a flexible analytical framework, allowing us to create order in an ambiguous reality, which involves, at the same time, diversity and inequality, local and global, tradition and innovation. The authors of the 12 chapters that follow have accepted this challenge. They have applied the three lenses to read their cases across various countries around the globe, examining both established and emerging professions, focusing on the growing heterogeneity—and inequalities—among professionals and the processes of differentiation that engender them.

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