

Ambiguous Authority and Aborted Ambition: Gender, Professionalism, and the Rise and Fall of the Welfare State

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Introduction

WOMEN LIBRARY LEADERS and library women generally have received unsatisfactory treatment in library history. The history of other female-intensive professions¹ generally shows the same problem: a record that ignores or blames women. This article will offer a new model for looking at the position of women in librarianship and other female-intensive professions. The model consists of three parts: (1) the needs of the emerging Progressive or welfare state with its ever-growing list of activities, the (2) prevailing gender system in Progressive America, and (3) the adjustments required to accommodate the tensions between the first two. This model rests upon the assumption that political context is vital to an understanding of women's work and the process of professionalization.

Progressivism and Professionalism

America in the 1890s faced numerous challenges: the rapid expansion of industrial capitalism, accompanied by urbanization, immigration, and the closing of the geographic frontier. Opportunity, the traditional promise of American life, seemed to be eroding for many and social class divisions were becoming more visible. The Progressive response to these conditions laid the groundwork for the future development of the welfare state in America. Progressivism linked large-scale

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government intervention, necessary to deal with the new conditions, to an old tradition, individual opportunity. Government intervention was justified as a method to curtail unfair competition or protect individual opportunity. With this mandate, government—federal, state, or local—took on numerous new tasks. The exact nature and extent of these tasks varied and depended upon the “social contract” hammered out from the conflicting demands of various reform groups, organized labor, and capital in a given period or place. The growth of government into areas that were previously individual, family, or neighborhood concerns, while uneven, has been striking in twentieth-century America.

An army of allegedly disinterested, objective experts with extended education, many claiming professional status, was required to support the Progressive state and the welfare state that evolved from it.² These experts would perform a variety of tasks; among these would be staffing regulatory agencies, teaching in the schools that now held children longer, inspecting products and practices, and conducting surveys and tests.³ Many of these careers, fostered by the Progressive state’s reforms to safeguard the opportunity of lower-class individuals, offered mobility to middle-class youth; among these would be women from colleges and universities, normal schools, and library- and hospital-training programs. A vocal feminist movement, often called the “first wave” to distinguish it from the current feminist movement, supported the new women experts.

Professional status remained elusive for most members of the army of experts. This is usually explained as a deficiency in the occupation’s knowledge base, in the code of ethics, or in other of those characteristics that sociological literature assigns to “true professions.” An alternative view suggests that the answer may be found in the relationship between a given occupation and the prevailing “arrangements of power,”⁴ for members of different occupations had different relationships to the major sources of political power and played different roles under the “social contract.” Some negotiated the delicate compromises involved in the social contract, working closely with ruling-class power brokers and even merging with them. Others legitimated or gave legitimacy to the arrangements that had been negotiated. Legitimation took two forms: development of ideology and the delivery of real services.

Members of the legal profession forged the compromise upon which the modern American industrial state rested; and while not all lawyers engaged in this work, lawyers came to dominate the core decisions as representatives of government and in the service of the major corporations and labor unions. Teachers, librarians, social workers, and medical workers were largely legitimators—their work made the

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basic arrangements of the state seem just and acceptable. They not only actively inculcated belief in the state but also made available worthwhile services to individuals who would not otherwise have access to them. Naïve revisionists in recent years have concentrated on the ideological arguments and overlooked the real services rendered. For example, platitudes about Americanization from various library leaders of the Progressive period are overreported, while the meaning of the public library in the life of a Russian Jewish immigrant like Mary Antin is almost overlooked.⁵

The role of the medical professions is anomalous. American doctors have remained more independent of the "social contract" than have doctors in other industrialized countries and American doctors' earnings and status are higher. They appear to have benefited from the power of the state—primarily through licensing arrangements—and to have performed relatively little service for the state. Of course, some doctors have performed legitimating functions. Critics point to the tendency to medicalize social or political problems—as in the use of drugs to control potentially troublesome populations or the sterilization of "undesirables." There are signs that the exceptional position of doctors may be changing, however, as promises of health services are offered, slowly and piecemeal, to various segments of the American population such as veterans and the elderly. (Those who insist that professional status comes from professional expertise will have to explain the declining power of doctors in recent decades when their expertise has been seemingly growing.)

Legitimizers generally work for the government or nonprofit organizations, and usually achieve their highest income as government employees. As government employees, they have little autonomy; and colleague control—supposedly the hallmark of professionalism—is limited. Despite state certification in these fields, practitioners have not always been able to insure that posts go to the certified. The current directors of the New York Public Library and of the Library of Congress are not librarians, for example. Negotiators may work for the government or for the private sector, but they generally achieve their highest earnings in the private sector. While many lawyers have humble careers—earning less than administrators in large public school systems, perhaps—the upper levels of the profession reach earnings beyond anything achieved in education, librarianship, or social work. Women professionals have been, and continue to be, concentrated in legitimating occupations or the so-called semiprofessions.

Today the welfare state, founded upon the Progressive model and developed in the years since World War II to include a considerably

expanded list of activities, is in disarray; predictably women are amongst the first to be affected.⁶ The large public bureaucracies in health, education, and welfare are everywhere under attack and facing cutbacks. (And just as the “true professions” begin to open up to women, these occupations are no longer the secure route to high earnings and status that they once were.⁷ The advances of a few women in librarianship into directorships and deanships must not obscure the use of numerous women as volunteers and part-time employees. With the growth of information science, librarianship as a profession may experience the kind of downward mobility that some have found characterized female employment patterns in bad times.⁸

Many professionals have abandoned the professional ideology emphasizing altruism and ethics as prospects of unemployment or underemployment loom. Lawyers advertise, hospitals for profit have sprung up, a growing number of doctors are now salaried employees, and some librarians have set up business as information brokers. Not surprisingly, there has been a decline in applications to professional schools and many have merged or closed.⁹ Public confidence in the professions also appears to be declining—reports of doctors cheating Medicare, unscrupulous lawyers, and poorly prepared teachers all contribute. It is not clear whether this is a permanent phenomenon. On the one hand, the expansion of higher education has diminished the unique status of the professional; high earnings and status are available to those with degrees in computer science and management, for example.¹⁰ Well-educated people are less likely to be impressed by professional education and may recognize the fragile basis of professional practice. Moreover, deprofessionalization may be speeded by computerization, according to some.

It seems premature, however, to bury the welfare state with its interventionist policies and need for professionals. The middle class, having benefited from many kinds of aid—e.g., tuition assistance and Medicare—and having found employment and status in government-fostered careers, may object. While the current outlook for the professions is less than rosy, it could change again. But the very dependence of the status of the professional upon the political climate makes the supposed authority of the professional ambiguous.

Gender System

By the 1890s, nineteenth-century America's familiar gender system—where roles and tasks were allocated to women and men with appropriate accompanying personality traits—was rapidly eroding.

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This erosion had major impact on men and a kind of “masculinity crisis”¹¹ developed in Progressive America in reaction to the changing nature of male work and to the threat that the “New Woman” seemed to present. With rapid urbanization and industrialization, many men left the farms and small towns where they had grown up and where their fathers, working as farmers or small businessmen, had enjoyed a degree of autonomy. Even if the fathers’ earnings were low, it is likely that they enjoyed heightened self-esteem from being known among a community of neighbors. The sons often found themselves in sedentary bureaucratic employment, living among anonymous strangers in an impersonal urban setting. The emergence of the large corporation as a dominant business unit and the growth of differentiation or rationalization—with individuals responsible for fewer but more specialized tasks—meant that even those with responsible positions could readily come to feel themselves mere cogs in a machine.

Accompanying this was the change in women’s roles that seemed to indicate an end to the traditional relations between the sexes. Middle-class women were emerging from the home in support of a variety of causes, often associated with cultural or reform activities. They were also claiming, in ever-increasing numbers, a place in the heretofore male domains of higher education, politics, and paid work. While differential pay scales favoring men generally prevailed, the threat of their loss existed. The growing possibility of competition with women and of women bosses or supervisors added to the anxiety. Not surprisingly, many men, including many Progressive reformers, believe that women had “gone too far.” Fear of feminization—or the spread of the supposedly dire influence of women—grew. One historian has observed that by the end of the century it was becoming increasingly difficult to “be a man” and that the “woman question” was really a question about men.¹²

According to some historians, men reacted to these circumstances by attempting to build a self-consciously masculine culture. “The strenuous life” popularized by the widely admired and charismatic Theodore Roosevelt appealed to many. A concern with “manliness” was evident in the popular literature of the day.¹³ A heightened militarism, the growth of body-contact sports such as football, and the formation of all-male organizations, often built around physical activities and youth work (such as the Boy Scouts [founded in 1910]) were other major elements of this culture. A backlash against coeducation resulted in the return to single sex (i.e., male) status of institutions such as Wesleyan University in 1912. When Owen Wister wrote the hugely successful

novel *The Virginian* in 1902 and dedicated it to Theodore Roosevelt, the now familiar western novel was born to meet the reading needs of this audience. This genre featured men who defended women without becoming domesticated or feminized by them. Just as few women of the day actually lived the life of the "New Woman," few men participated in these activities; but as in the case of the women, enough men participated in aspects of this new culture for it to symbolize the hopes and fears of a major portion of American men.

The pressures to resist the dreaded feminization may have been even greater for men engaged in cultural and intellectual pursuits than for others. American culture was seen by many as already feminized, a judgment which some mid-twentieth-century historians share.¹⁴ The trend toward the employment of women in cultural fields was accelerated by the increasing numbers of women with advanced training in them, the growing demand for workers in these fields without a corresponding increase in remuneration, and the inability to employ immigrants due to cultural disparity. In some of these fields—such as teaching, where women had a long history of participation—the demands for equal pay, and even its occasional appearance, added to the male anxiety.¹⁵ In short, some accommodation would have to be reached if the seemingly ever growing needs of society for teachers, social workers, librarians, and so on were to be met without subjecting men to feminization and the accompanying loss of status and pay.

Segregation and Ambition

Sexual segregation emerged as the method to accommodate the needs of society, the anxieties of men, and the ambitions of educated women for work outside the home. The advance of professionalism, supported by both ambitious women and men, and the decline of feminism which had fostered the careers of many women in Progressive America, expedited a segregation beneficial to men. While professional status proved elusive—as no change in the basic relationship between these occupations and the political power structure had occurred—the status of women in the female-intensive professions declined.

The patterns of segregation (both hierarchic and territorial)¹⁶ are so familiar today that many have forgotten that there was a time when things were different. While women never held most of the power in the female-intensive professions, they were indeed far better represented at all levels earlier in the century. A vigorous policy of male recruitment—never likely to reverse the sex ratio in the female-intensive professions—reinforced male control of these occupations.¹⁷ It came to be widely

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believed that the best way for a man to be assured of advancement was to enter a women's field,¹⁸ and many men entering the female-intensive professions anticipated managerial careers.¹⁹

Looking first at the hierarchic segregation or disproportionate placement of men at the top, one finds unfortunately the data are scarce and not uniform. The statistics for education are the most detailed. The percentage of elementary school principals who were women declined from 61.7 percent to 19.6 percent in the years from 1905 to 1972; the comparable figures for high school principals are 5.7 percent and 1.4 percent.²⁰ While there are no comparable figures in librarianship, Schiller found, in surveying available statistical sources, that women's representation in top positions in libraries reached a peak in the 1920s, but diminished dramatically in the ensuing decades. Sample figures from partial surveys are: while in 1950, 50 percent of the deans and directors of accredited U.S. library schools were women, by 1970 only 19 percent were. By the mid-1960s all of the nation's largest academic libraries were headed by men; previously, four had been headed by women. While in 1930, 27 percent of the nation's seventy-four largest academic libraries were headed by women, in 1967 only 5 percent were. The situation was substantially the same in the public library world with numbers and percentages of male directors in the largest public libraries shifting toward men dramatically from 1930 to the 1960s. In 1950, 80 percent of state librarians or directors of state library agencies were women, but by 1970 it was 48 percent. Following the tendency to replace women faculty members with men at the women's colleges, women library directors at these institutions were increasingly likely to be men. Women certainly did manage during this period, but what they managed was likely to be small units and those serving special populations such as children and the handicapped.²¹ Sociologist Harold Wilensky, writing in the late 1960s, noted that men "have entered and are gaining control of the most attractive female occupations (secondary school teaching, social work, librarianship....)" while women have only held their own or lost ground in the more prestigious male occupations.²² Contrary to the predictions and hopes of the early pioneers of the Progressive period, the status of American women was declining by the second half of the twentieth century.²³

This masculinization at the top was matched by a territorial segregation that found men in disproportionate numbers in certain specialties. In education, men were more likely to teach older children and to teach mathematics, science, and, to a lesser degree, social studies. In librarianship, men were disproportionately represented in academic librarianship and underrepresented in work with children in either

public or school library settings. Those areas with the highest proportion of men were, of course, seen as the most prestigious, and the most professional.

While the link between the professionalization movement in the female-intensive professions and the patriarchal incorporation of women's work has been observed,²⁴ the role of a declining commitment to feminism in forging that link has not been analyzed. For professionalism and feminism both flourished in Progressive America and women advanced in the professions. It was only when women ceased their organized efforts on behalf of better representation at upper levels that their relative position began to decline. It was the organized feminist movement of Progressive America that propelled Ella Flagg Young to the school superintendency in Chicago in 1909 and that fostered the careers of library leaders such as Katharine Sharp of the Armour Institute and the University of Illinois, and Isadore Mudge of Columbia University. Decades would pass before women would regain a similar share of upper-level posts; it is not clear that they have done so in librarianship.²⁵

Yet many of the same factors that operate against class-based movements also operate against feminism. A cult of individualism that denies the social processes at work in individual success and failure is widely accepted. As feminism faded, woman as a distinct category in historical or statistical studies also faded. It became difficult for a new generation of practitioners to assess their position. This situation also helped to perpetuate the "badge of shame" mentality:²⁶ since women were never mentioned as a category, perhaps it was wrong to do so. Lack of statistical information made it difficult to assess trends and relative statuses. Historian David Tyack and political scientist Evelyn Hansot point out that by the end of the 1920s the National Education Association (NEA) had stopped reporting figures by sex.²⁷ Librarians, too, have had a struggle to attain gender as a category in major statistical surveys. Some sixty-five years have passed between Salome Fairchild Cutler's 1904 report entitled "Women in American Libraries" and Anita Schiller's study, *Characteristics of Professional Personnel in College and University Libraries*. Lack of statistical data is especially handicapping in the female-intensive professions where there were always at least some women leaders and some up-and-coming younger women whose very presence could be used to deflect complaints. Women leaders did not see themselves as tokens or the last of a small band. There were occasional special efforts which appeared to offer women advancement. The NEA created special posts in the organization for women and Perry Morrison recommended special middle-level posts for women.²⁸

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Unlikely to lead to true leadership posts, these actions followed the pattern of limited accommodation to female ambition.

Ignorant of their true history and status, noticing that things did not seem to be much better in other occupations, and urged to improve their lot by individual meritocratic advance, women denied, accepted, or protested the rampant sexual segregation. Evidence of denial is clear in the Public Library Inquiry survey in which a higher percentage of women than men responded that men did not enjoy advantages in salary and promotions.²⁹ Acceptance was probably the path followed by most since it received the most social support. Popular opinion supported a variety of experts who declared women's primary role to be domestic. During the Depression, sentiment against the employment of wives grew and the practice was sometimes prohibited in the public sector.³⁰ Pragmatically, many library women may have agreed with the one who wrote to the *Library Journal* in support of the hiring of male directors since men would probably be more able to advance the position of the library than women by using informal contacts with civic decision-makers who were men.³¹ While there appear to have been quite a few women who protested by the late 1930s, some felt it necessary to distance themselves from feminism. One woman, protesting inequitable treatment of women candidates for top posts, denied that she belonged "to that detestable species known as 'feminist'."³² Such isolated protests were destined to be ignored.

The fate of these women whose ambitions were thus stifled has not been investigated. Sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter has described what happens to those "stuck" in positions from which promotion is unlikely. They tend to "limit and lower their aspirations, and appear to be less motivated to achieve." They tend to over-conform to bureaucratic rules thus becoming more passive and conservative. Many of the ugly stereotypes with which librarians, nurses, and teachers are victimized are based on the behavior of people who are merely putting in time on a job. This behavior is not limited to women but may be more widespread among them than their male colleagues in the women's professions who are more likely to be moving ahead in the organization. Men may therefore display qualities regarded more favorably by most people, such as self-confidence, high self-esteem, and a more constructive outlook.³³

Melvil Dewey early established a pattern that was to persist in librarianship and other female-intensive professions. Dewey, assisted by a group of bright, energetic young women ("the Wellesley half-dozen") began numerous library ventures. When he moved on to higher earnings and more prestigious work at the early age of thirty-nine, the

Wellesley women stayed behind, "stuck" in highly bureaucratized library settings.³⁴ Ambition, for personal or social betterment conceived in the bright Progressive dawn of reform, was aborted in the self-absorbed evening of the 1920s.

Historiographic Trends

The current history of the female-intensive professions is inadequate. The little that has been written generally fails to acknowledge the role of women in these professions or the importance of these professions to women and to American life. It might seem that writers of women's history or of standard professional histories would concern themselves with women in the female-intensive professions, but this has not been the case. Writers of women's history have usually been influenced by feminism, the "new social history," or both. Many feminists have an ambivalence about professionalism: on the one hand, they want to increase the number of women in professional careers and frequently describe the struggles of individual women for such careers. On the other hand, they question the rules and roles that characterize professionalism. (We have seen, for example, librarians who demand more women directors and simultaneously challenge the elitist role of libraries in society.) The new social history has had enormous influence upon women's history; it emphasizes history "from the bottom up," featuring studies of anonymous aggregates and often uses quantitative methods.³⁵ Such an approach deprives women's history of historical actors—usually leaders—and considers women in the mass only. On the other hand, men are studied in both traditional and new history and are seen as both individuals and aggregates.³⁶ Writers of women's history often share the general negative stereotypes of women teachers, librarians, and nurses. These historians' prejudices may be reinforced by extended academic training in institutions where professional training in education, librarianship, and nursing is often seen as inferior. It is not surprising that despite the enormous recent outpouring of scholarly books and articles on women's history and work that there has been almost nothing written about women in the female-intensive professions. Instead, working-class women and those who pioneered careers in the traditionally male professions are emphasized. There are numerous studies of "exceptional" or elite women "firsts" in prestigious fields on the one hand and of mill "girls," domestics, or prostitutes, on the other.

Generally, studies of the women's professions have been written by practitioners and reflect the characteristic concern about professional-

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ism that haunt many in these fields. Practitioners tend to ignore the presence of women in the female-intensive professions because they share the widespread view that the presence of so many women has a negative impact on professional status. Library history emphasizes either leadership or fields such as academic librarianship, both of which are disproportionately male. The few female leaders have generally been ignored even in the standard reference sources.³⁷

Recently, a few professional historians with an interest in women's history have turned their attention to the female-intensive professions. The two best-known works are Dee Garrison's *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (1979) and Barbara Melosh's *The Physician's Hand: Work, Culture and Conflict in American Nursing* (1982). Unfortunately, no similarly ambitious study of elementary school teaching (the largest of the female-intensive professions) exists. Garrison's work reflects the traditional stereotypes about women and women librarians and relies upon a methodology that reinforces those stereotypes.³⁸ The Melosh work makes a great leap forward—she has carefully studied both the prescriptive works that reflect an idealized version of reality and the evidence on the nurses' work life. While Melosh's work breaks new theoretical ground and is especially strong in its presentation of the role of nursing in the lives of nurses and of the internal disputes in nursing, Garrison's work has overemphasized the role of political context and presented a deterministic view of librarians that merely continues the traditional view of feminization.

No serious study of the paid work of educated American women is complete without an examination of the female-intensive professions. The importance of this work to women is shown in both its impact on the consciousness of generations of women and the degree of involvement of women in these fields. Experience in nursing, or teaching, or library work "subverted common expectations of feminine domesticity."³⁹

The women's professions have been especially important to American women. In comparison with other advanced or industrialized nations, the United States has a lower incidence of women in the traditional professions.⁴⁰ The participation of women in the professional category (mainly in teaching, nursing, and library work) has been higher than the overall participation of women in the labor force. During the period 1870-1930 the rate of this professional employment was double that of nonprofessional employment of women. These so-called semiprofessions offered and continue to offer unprecedented opportunity to a major segment of American women. These careers,

although not offering high earnings in comparison to those in which men are a majority of the practitioners, account for some of the highest earning levels achieved by women in the 1980s. A 1981 survey showed that of the top twenty occupations—in terms of wages or salaries to full-time employed women (omitting the self-employed and occupations with fewer than 50,000 individuals)—secondary and elementary school administrators ranked tenth, registered nurses ranked fifteenth, and librarians ranked twentieth.⁴¹ The College and University Personnel Association's annual survey of salaries of academic administrators reveals that women have earned higher salaries in library positions than in almost all other areas.⁴² The role of these occupations in sponsoring upward mobility for women appears to be major. The importance of these occupations to women is not new; historians estimate that one of every four Massachusetts women in the nineteenth century taught school at some time during her life.⁴³

The value of the work of women in the female-intensive professions to the development of the American nation can hardly be overestimated. Often dismissed as "social housekeeping," this community-building work is especially vital where individualism is endorsed and alienation is an ever-present threat. Education became an increasingly important channel of mobility after the closing of the frontier. Early supporters of the extension of education attested to the importance of highly skilled but low-paid women in schoolroom and library. Mary Beard, historian, social critic, and feminist, writing in 1915, lauded the work of women in public libraries in cities with large immigrant populations for stimulating "social forces" that promoted the "common good."⁴⁴

Beard's praise of women librarians contrasts sharply with the condemnation in Garrison's recent book. The two views are separated by decades in time and many levels of consciousness, yet each reflects an aspect of our fragmented past; the pioneering professional woman advancing both her own career and the social good and the rules-oriented martinet trapped in an occupational backwater. Only a new model for looking at the history of the female-intensive professions can integrate these diverse elements and provide us with a much needed new understanding of our history.

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