

Magalì Sarfatti Larson

Response to David Sciulli. Revisionism in Sociology of Professions Today: Conceptual Approaches by Larson

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Response to David Sciulli

“Revisionism in Sociology of Professions Today: Conceptual Approaches by Larson”

by Magali Sarfatti Larson

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I have been asked by the editors to respond to David Sciulli’s long article for *Sociologica*, “Revisionism in Sociology of Professions Today: Conceptual Approaches by Larson.” I am honored by the time and effort Professor Sciulli has devoted to an exhaustive criticism of my work. He discusses most of what I have written from 1977 to 1994 and I do not blame him for having stopped where he did. After all, his purpose is not to follow all my work but to deal a death blow to my brand of revisionism and my presumed theoretical ambitions, as he clearly announces in his opening salvo (which he calls an “abstract”):

One result of lacking any mooring at a conceptual level is that her descriptions and explanations of professionalism across her entire career suffer as a result, being at once *ad hoc*, unreliable and ultimately contradictory.

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond. I have no access to a library in the small Italian village where I am and I do not travel with my collected works; hopefully, that will keep me to the task. I admit that it was a little tedious to read some 100 pages devoted to my work and inconsistencies, and I can easily imagine that writing them left Professor Sciulli no option but invective against Marxist ideologists, leftists, politically correct liberals, puerile conspiratorial theorists and others of my ilk. After this, I was eager to get to the theory of professions good “for all complex societies, from antiquity and the late Middle Ages forward” that Professor Sciulli is proposing. It is sketchily previewed in 17 of these 124 pages; as he told Rolf Torstendahl in 2005

[Sciulli 2005], the full development will have to wait for the publication of two long manuscripts and six other articles [two on the French *Académie* have appeared in 2007]; however, what he told us then and tells us now is both very interesting and perplexing.

Professor Sciulli bases the strength of his theory on the *structural* qualities of professions and/or professionalism projects (two terms that he tends to use indistinctly):

All qualities constitutive of professions uniquely, as opposed to all other expert occupations and middle class occupations, are first structural, thus invariant, and then institutional. Being constitutive and invariant, these structural qualities are found in all professionalism projects without exception, both historically and cross-nationally today [Sciulli 2008].

We may assume that the most important qualities are intrinsic to the *structured situations* that characterize professionalism “without exception.” Here, Sciulli tells us what these situations are *not* better than what they are: they are *not* fluid and repetitive market relations, or formal contracts, or “sites of socio-culturally inconsequential diversion” [Sciulli 2007, 143], and they are almost the opposite of patron-client networks. So, if and when we succeed in identifying professionalism, we shall find it in structured sites defined by what they are not. Fortunately, we can rely for more information on Sciulli’s significant and interesting studies of the French *Académie of Visual Arts*, one of which I use now in order to better understand the paper at hand.

In the “Revisionism” article, Professor Sciulli’s uses the term “structural” in a puzzling way: he does not consider “socio-economic” factors structural, even though they are impersonal, independent to a large extent of what actors believe about them, and resistant to their interested and deliberate actions. In fact, he blames me, as well as Randall Collins and Andrew Abbott, for having reduced professionalism to socio-economic factors (quite an exaggeration on his part, I think) and therefore being unable to even glimpse the structural, invariant qualities of professions.

[T]he relationship between structured situations and professionalism (...) appears prior to the consolidation of capitalism, such as in mid-seventeenth century Paris, and, we propose, it will remain equally evident in the future should capitalism ever be displaced by some alternative mode of production. In addition, the relationship between structured situations and professionalism remains invariant *even as the truism underlying contemporaries’ distinction between structured situations and other sites and venues is itself a variable, because it is cultural* (...) This is why the *substance* of the occupational activities undertaken within structured situations is always and everywhere also a variable. It evolves historically and varies cross-nationally, along with cultural truisms [Sciulli 2008, first italics mine].

Sciulli's usage of "truism" intends to indicate that structured situations are self-evidently such but we do not know for how large a sector of society this holds. For the Parisian *Académie of Visual Arts*, the relevant sector must have been the commissioning or the buying public (depending on the century) that is, strata of aristocratic or bourgeois society influenced from the late seventeenth century on by the *Académie's* discursive efforts. The sustaining truism, according to Sciulli, collapsed under the impact of the Impressionists' challenge; it must therefore have started its decline after the first *Salon des Refusés* in 1863:

[A]t the moment anyone of repute and influence openly questions a prevailing cultural understanding on the bases of what others of repute and influence consider to be credible grounds, this signals its impending collapse as a truism [Sciulli 2008; see also Sciulli 2007, 141].

But was the mounting challenge enough for the *Académie* to lose its grip on the public definition of good painting, not to speak of its monopoly of instruction and its commanding lead on clients and commissions? It would not seem so, considering the hardships endured by impressionist painters and, still more relevantly, by their post-impressionist successors and the time it took for an alternative apparatus of networks and careers to emerge.¹ But Sciulli does not appear to be really interested in the material base of structured situations, or in what corrodes the "entrenchment" these sites allow to their denizens; here and elsewhere, he tells us little about the conditions that engender the structured matrices of professionalism or let them subsist, *avant la lettre* or today, except that some conditions must exist. It seems to me that sustaining (but unexplained) cultural truisms are primordial in his theory; as he writes:

[F]rom the late nineteenth century forward a quite different cultural truism gains salience and demonstrable potency across Western civil societies. Contemporaries increasingly *believe universally* that legal advocacy and medical delivery and research unfold within structured situations, no longer in embedded exchanges or at fluid sites [Sciulli 2008, italics mine].

I am tempted to say in the revisionists' defense that Freidson, Collins, Johnson, Abbott, Brint, I and others are above all guilty of having succumbed to a universal belief, but that would be too easy. I concede without argument that we, like Parsons and his followers, have almost exclusively concentrated on the late nineteenth century, on the Anglo-American world, and on the mirages of the reigning truism. Without speaking of truisms, I have admitted it in writing, but I will get later to self-defense [Larson 1990].

¹ The classic study is White and White [1965].

There are other “structural qualities and social consequences constitutive of professionalism” beside structured sites [Sciulli 2008]; they include, unsurprisingly, items that appear in almost every list: “Independent socio-cultural authority,” and “fiducial responsibilities” of two kinds, purposeful (for the client or patron wellbeing) and inadvertent (for the institutional design of the larger social order). A surprise, but of a different kind, is to read that the fourth exclusive feature of professions is that of introducing “two sets of consequences into the larger society: immediate ones, which either harm or benefit client or patron wellbeing; and longer term consequences, which either harm or benefit institutional design” [*ibidem*]. We are never told what these larger consequences may be, not here, and not in the 2005 or 2007 articles; we may note that if we say “those immediately concerned” instead of “client or patron,” and we consider the larger society’s institutions broadly, the fourth exclusive feature of professionalism becomes not exclusive at all but applicable to a host of social phenomena.

Only professions possess these four features (operating in structured sites, independent socio-cultural authority, fiducial responsibilities of two kinds and immediate and longer term consequences for the larger society). However, other traits that in them are necessary and invariant can be imitated or feigned by ambitious occupations, thus creating great trouble for sociologists. In this article, Sciulli refers to epistemological and didactic occupational orientations and “procedural-normative integrity and collegial form in both internal governance and external regulation;” in the *Archives’* article on the *Académie* of Visual Arts he is more specific and adds “projects of broader cultural upgrading;”² the combination of “occupational training with more abstract, theoretical instruction, intellection;” the fact that professions provide instruction in open view, not in secret, not by “unilateral deference to any particular instructor;” the rigorous and scrupulous institutionalization of “the integrity of examinations and competitions based on anonymously submitted and scored submissions,” and, again, the fact that professions “institutionalize unambiguous epistemological (and often didactic) occupational standards and practices” [Sciulli 2007, 143-145].

Sciulli [2008] writes briefly here about the “inadvertent professionalism in corporate governance today” but most of his conceptual apparatus is admittedly based on his pathbreaking study of the *Académie* of Visual Arts in Paris. He writes:

This article (...) marks the first effort in the sociology of professions to trace qualities *constitutive* of professionalism as such to any occupation *a)* during the *ancien régime*,

² He is kind enough to quote without disapproval my idea that professions contribute to create or “elevate the discernment” of their “lay publics” [Sciulli 2007, 143].

b) on the Continent, c) in a field other than the law. With this, it explodes wide open the received pool of putative exemplars from which the sociology of professions has drawn its empirical generalizations for over seventy years [Sciulli 2007,143].

The historian Maria Malatesta [2005] has called this an archeological approach that does not acknowledge its debt to Foucault, and also noted that historians like Charles Mc Clelland had studied professionalism in the arts some years before Sciulli discovered it. As a sociologist, I am happy to grant Professor Sciulli the “scoop” he claims and applaud the opening of this broad field of research. Indeed, more research is due to show that this swallow (the *Académie*) contributed to make a spring. For Sciulli [2007, 141], what ended with the Impressionist revolution is “the cultural truism (...) that painting and sculpture are expert services animated by epistemological and didactic standards of success.” But he does not tell us whether the *Académie*’s discourse on merit and its pioneering models of meritocratic selection and advancement left a direct imprint on later efforts; or, for instance, whether the *Académie* influenced the Napoleonic institution of the *grande Ecole* as the matrix of all structured sites. We need such knowledge to confirm the genealogy proposed by Professor Sciulli, not to speak of his theory “good for all complex societies.”

Professor Sciulli makes another point against the revisionists’ lock up of professions inside the sociological cage of “work and occupations.” I consider it a very important point.³ He says that when professions are treated socio-economically, sociologists and historians are not capable of identifying any long-term institutional consequences of “professional governance, regulation and activities.” Therefore, *professions can and should be treated as intermediary associations*, for only then those longer term consequences “come into view. These are the benefits and harms professions and their associations introduce *structurally* into the institutional design of the larger social order” [*ibidem*, 142-143]. He does not give us a single example of what these benefits and harms are (or of what his singular case was the precursor).⁴ The advantages of his “more abstract, analytical approach” remain, for the moment, too vague to displace the benefits and harms to “clients and local communities, and then by extension to the occupational order and stratification system” that are all we

³ In years past, when Fernando Henrique Cardoso was planning his return to Brazil and the launching of his extraordinary political career, we had a conversation about whether the professional associations that had survived the military dictatorship could in any way function as platforms for the transition to democracy. I admit that I did not have much to contribute to my old friend’s concern, which was not academic but political and pragmatic.

⁴ I understand that Sciulli cannot go into the thorny subject of whether the *Académie*’s entrenched position contributed to good painting or, rather, blocked its evolution, but art critics can tackle the important question of what entrenchment contributes to the advancement of art as a form of knowledge.

revisionists manage to see [*Ibidem*, 142]. With this degree of vagueness, he hurls the accusation of vagueness against all the revisionists' work, most especially against mine. The reader can decide how much more precise he is than I am, comparing the two definitions of mine that he cites with his own (which we finally get on towards the end of his paper). I shall turn now to what things I have tried to see, without gainsaying the narrow scope and limitations of my approach.

From the abstract on, I was unable to get the famous words of the satirist Stephen Colbert out of my mind. He was addressing President Bush at the 2006 Gridiron Dinner, and I cannot resist quoting him from memory:⁵ this great president, he said, is a man who does not change his mind; we can be sure that he will think on Wednesday exactly what he thought on Monday, no matter what happened on Tuesday. I understand that Professor Sciulli does not ask me to be stubborn or impermeable to facts, but conceptually solid, theoretically faithful to my sources and myself, and all of one piece. I regret having disappointed him. I cannot emphasize enough that I never intended to offer a grand theory or remake the sociology of professions. I was laboring, in fact, in a structured situation of my own, that of a PhD candidate.⁶ What mattered most to me and to my advisor was that I should design a feasible dissertation; it was not going to be "theoretical" or "historical" but an empirical study of a unionization movement among employed professional architects.⁷ I was not interested at all in offering a new theory of professions (much less a universal theory!). My thesis became a historical account of professionalization in two Anglo-American countries only because what I had to read was unsatisfactory, unmoored in any material base and, in my view, an echo of the accounts that constituted professions give of themselves. I started writing a different account. I was deeply influenced by my reading of Karl Polanyi and in extending the idea of fictitious commodity to skilled or expert labor. Having studied with Arthur Stinchcombe, I was interested also in the question of how trust can be warranted among strangers; and being less impressed by Carr-Saunders and Wilson than by George Eliot, I was interested in how apothecaries and barber-surgeons and conveyancers became respectable, and

⁵ The Gridiron Dinner is held annually in Washington. It is a white-tie affair that brings together the nation's top political journalists and the folks they cover. They are supposed to make fun of each other and rival with the president making fun of himself. Choosing a famous satirist like Stephen Colbert proved to be a bit more than President Bush's staff expected.

⁶ For the sake of full disclosure, I had gone through Berkeley in three years and I very much wanted to receive my doctorate before the birth of my child. It was imperative to design a research that would not take the number of years (4 or 5 if I am not mistaken) average at Berkeley.

⁷ I never wrote it. My interest in architecture, on which I have written several articles beside the book Sciulli trashes, took an entirely different direction.

possibly eligible partners in marriage for the daughters of the bourgeoisie. That thesis later became the basis of the 1977 book.

There is no doubt that I exaggerated the rupture between the traditional *ancien régime* professions – whose curricula, as Sciulli [2007, 123] himself writes, entirely disregarded occupational training – and the projects of professional reformers. Indeed, I was mainly posing the question of how relatively useless and ineffective older “professions” secured a place in potentially widening markets. I worked with the secondary sources I had and urgency may have made me careless; but Professor Sciulli wants more than to revisit the problem of periodization and set me straight about the relations between sociology and historiography. His intellectual style, apparently, is to dispatch rival theories to the recycling bin instead of building cumulatively on what they may have contributed.

For instance, he might have considered that a market shelter may appear precisely as a “structured situation” in a society resisting the onslaught of market capitalism. Surely, professional reformers had to induce others to follow in the path prescribed, and they needed to hold them together by some interest in obtaining knowledge and skills, as well as in “tangible social and economic rewards.”⁸ But Sciulli, needing a straw man (or, rather, a straw woman) to attack, prefers accusing me of unalloyed economic reductionism. Therefore, it is better to ignore the resemblance between the French *academiciens*’ efforts of social uplift, and what I call *status* or respectability. Yet, had he noted this resemblance, Sciulli could have confounded me and others better on our myopic choice of sources and faulty periodization.⁹ Similarly, he ignores the importance I gave to R.H. Tawney and to Polanyi’s notion of a counter-movement in the *Rise of Professionalism*; they were the grounds for my views that the professions, in seeking to expand their market, develop the social conceptions of human and social needs as a *structural* effect [Larson 1977, 56-63] or that many of the professions I call techno-bureaucratic defend an ideal of public service in defending their own function. Indeed, these two views could have been related to the sustenance of Sciulli’s truism, but it is more important for him to assert that I argue

explicitly, but not always consistently, that whatever consequences professions (that is, monopolistic expert occupations) introduce into civil society, these consequences are *a*) largely deleterious and *b*) confined to the occupational order and stratification system [Sciulli 2008].

⁸ For an excellent study of how two different medical associations achieved success (or not) in this project in nineteenth century England, see Berman [2006].

⁹ Wilfred Prest had done so quite convincingly in 1986. See Prest [1986].

In the narrow confines of this article, ignoring what I may have said in 1977 sets the case for my inconsistency (or my evolution?) ten years later. Indeed, I did not think that I had to remain faithful to what I believed “on Monday” when attacking a problem that did *not* derive from my revisionist theories, but from the relations of lawyers and politics [Larson 1989]. The subject had come up in a long exchange that started with a conference on the legal profession organized in 1984 in Bellagio by Richard Abel and Philip Lewis. It took me over two years to write that paper on the law, and I admit that it would have been much easier if I had had a ready-made general theory to apply, but I did not.

Compared to Sciulli’s general tenor, what he says about my article on lawyers is benign. There, as in my 1990 article which he analyzes at length, he finds me finally converted to the novel idea that “the contributions expert occupations make to the larger social order are broadly cultural and social psychological, not narrowly socio-economic” [Sciulli 2008]. Unaware of his own very American assumption that monopoly is always bad, he asserts that now I characterize the state “as a positive agency” because I no longer portray it as allowing monopolies of competence (he sees unwarranted monopoly as one of the Marxist conceits of my past) and does not mention that I cite Foucault’s argument on positive power at length. It is long and tiresome to refute all of Professor Sciulli’s assertions, so I shall grant him his dislikes. He seems to dislike President Johnson’s War on Poverty (the beneficial effects of which on the lowest incomes are amply documented by Christopher Jencks, among others) as much as he dislikes my admiration for New Deal liberalism, or what I say about American suburbs in a chapter of *Behind the Postmodern Façade* that is based on others’ research [*ibidem*]. He dislikes my reference to the Carter presidency as an “interlude.”¹⁰ He dislikes that I “constantly use terms like ‘capitalist societies,’ ‘capitalist industrialization’ and ‘industrial capitalism’ rather than more neutral terms typically employed in the social sciences” (peace be to Schumpeter and Marx himself) [*ibidem*]. I do not believe that terms he favors, like “truism” or “lodestar” or “bromide,” are much more typically employed in the social sciences; but I *know* that we do not typically refer to colleagues as providers of puerile conspiracy theories, or uttering “strident bromides” (a lovely oxymoron, I admit) or going over the deep end or whatever Sciulli thinks it acceptable to write in an article he publishes on line and in Italy. I could say in the same venue that he goes over or off the deep end in trashing my book on architecture, but his account is based on so many misunder-

¹⁰ I find his reproach totally baffling: “She refers to the Carter presidency as an ‘interlude’ between Republican administrations, Nixon-Ford and Reagan-Bush (rather than ever imagining doing the reverse)” [Sciulli 2008].

standings, misquotes and misconstructions that I tend to think it is quite conscious and deliberate.

Sciulli completely misunderstands what I intended to do in *Behind the Post-modern Façade*, which I subtitled *Architectural Change in Late Twentieth Century America* with the purpose of informing possible readers. I did not choose *A Theory on Architects and Architecture through the Ages*, or *How Architecture Followed Art to Become a Profession*, but that seems to be what Professor Sciulli reads in it. So let me be clear: whatever else Sciulli can find in it, my argument is (or, rather, has been, for I do not make it in this book¹¹) that architects followed the road to professionalization by emphasizing the skill of design (the Italian *disegno*) *in part* because it had not been preempted jurisdictionally by civil engineers, and because they could not easily claim any other particular expertise (for instance on new materials). Also, and thanks to the process described by Professor Sciulli in the *Académie*, visual artists had attained a higher status in *ancien regime* societies than occupations dealing directly with construction. The school of architecture that emerged in France was the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* and in the early twentieth century its graduates went to found departments of architecture to the United States (and also other countries). Architectural history is considered a branch of art history and taught as such. Only very recently have these Beaux Arts-derived schools added business management classes to their curricula. Design is still the major test in the architectural board's examination (even though structural engineering may be more difficult, design is considered an area in which judgment can be arbitrary and difficult to predict). Philosophers like Suzanne Langer, Roger Scruton, and Gaston Bachelard consider architecture an art. Architectural achievements and prizes are followed in the art section of the major newspapers. A frequent illusion among entering architectural students is that they will produce beautiful buildings, *objects of art*, like the masters with whom they are getting acquainted.

I never argued that architects take artists as their "lodestar" because they see them as autonomous and successful professionals. This is total nonsense. The expert occupation of architecture may well be (often is, I believe) the victim of the media and a sector of public opinion that lionize architects-as-artists. Architects who are admired and talked about, architects who give master classes, architects who serve on juries, architects who are "stars," tend to be considered "artists." They are very few, but they are too often presented as models – unattainable but models still.

My intention in this book was to see *how and why this presumed profession* (yes, I was a victim of the still reigning truism, by which even low-paid architects consider

¹¹ See Larson [1983].

themselves professionals, and of my conceptual obtuseness) *changed a discourse* that it had followed, with variants, for many decades and which had enormously influenced the shape of the world in which we live. I am grateful to Professor Sciulli for reminding his readers and me that because architecture

is at once functionally useful, intimately linked to economic investment, and contributive to the fate of entire locales, the social consequences of architecture are frequently far more expansive than are those of the inutile fine arts [*ibidem*].

I frankly cannot understand why he thinks that I believe the fine arts qualify as a profession and provide the model of professionalism for architecture [*ibidem*]. It is such a total misreading of what I say about architects trying to use the pursuit of beauty as something *only* they can provide and failing in attaining solid professional status that I shall not even try to respond. The late Joseph Esherick, who insisted on writing the preface to my book, used to say that in architecture, art is the last refuge of the scoundrel. I tend to agree, but I tried to show it by describing different types of architects, practitioners who interpreted the fiducial relation with their clients differently and therefore wanted, sought and offered their clients different things. Most readers, except Professor Sciulli, saw quite clearly where my preferences lay, and I say it very clearly also in the conclusion of the book which he hated too much to read with dispassion. He prefers blaming me for accepting the self-understanding of artists as an anti-bourgeois avant-garde and thus of exonerating architects of all sort of misdeeds (in what he calls “the worst sorts of leftist, politically correct editorializing.”) Needless to say, I am interested in contemporary art, but I do not believe in the redeeming social effects of the avant-garde. Sciulli also accuses me of providing a “puerile conspiracy theory” of architecture; but he neglects to inform the reader that I was *quoting* architects who told me that beauty in architecture must be sought *as a deception* because that is not what most clients intend to pay for, that, in most cases, beauty is *what they smuggle in*. Incidentally, this may have appeared in the interview I had with Joan Goody, a Boston architect who may not qualify as a “star” but is in every one of the dimensions of architecture an extraordinarily competent architect and a recognized producer of beautiful, useful and usable buildings.

In sum, Sciulli makes me say things I do not believe I said (such as “dependence heteronomy”); he quotes incomplete arguments (as in the case of the Progressive Architecture jury which ended up denying architecture and profession, something that is not an Olympian judgment of mine but one I sustain with arguments); and he repeatedly adopts the practice of “collage,” quoting pages at great distance from one another as supposed references for an argument he makes to feed his general thrust:

Behind the Postmodern Facade is not a sound theoretical treatment of professions or professionalism – which it never intended to be.

With this diatribe on a book of which he nonetheless rescues a few chapters, Sciulli crowns his general attack on all the revisionists, ideologists, materialists, users of Marxist language and conspiracy theories, for not having provided the theory of professions that goes beyond capitalism, beyond the labor market, beyond the stratification system and beyond vagueness.¹² As I said, I never aspired to having or producing such theory and I shall be glad to read Professor Sciulli's definitive sociology of professions when he publishes it. My approach to sociology is to pose problems that I find interesting and think about them. I am honored and humbled that others care enough about the subject to read and discuss what I write. And I am grateful for all fair criticism, even Professor Sciulli's, which often transpires despite the unacceptable tone of some of this long and rather badly articulated article.

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¹² He also informs us amusingly that the Gramscian terms "hegemony" and "counter-hegemony" are not applicable to his study of corporate governance [Sciulli 2008].

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Response to David Sciulli

“Revisionism in Sociology of Professions Today: Conceptual Approaches by Larson.”

Abstract: This article responds to Professor Sciulli’s long criticism of my work on professions in this issue of *Sociologica*. I look at the general theory he sketches based on his case study of the French Academie d’Arts Visuels, and I argue that I never intended to produce a general theory. I advocate the right to adopt different approaches for different problems, and declare myself partisan of an intellectual style that builds on the contributions of others rather than seeking to delete them.

Keywords: professionalism, professions, architecture, Sciulli, Academie d’Arts Visuels.

Magali Sarfatti Larson is Italian but has lived most of her life abroad, first in South America, then in France and later, as an adult, in the United States. She has written books and articles on the sociology of development in Latin America before turning to professions and architecture with *The Rise of Professionalism, Behind the Postmodern Facade*, and many articles published in several countries. She received her PhD at Berkeley in 1974 and has taught at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, Temple University and, as a distinguished professor, at the University of Urbino until 2001. She is particularly interested in political culture and political action.