Disciplined Minds

A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes Their Lives

by

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TIMID PROFESSIONALS

(Excerpt from Chapter 1)

“No two people are allowed to read the same thing.” I said above the noise, gesturing toward the other passengers on the crowded subway car. My out-of-town visitor glanced around the clattering train. Indeed, the commuters hurrying to their jobs in Manhattan’s office buildings, restaurants, shops and other workplaces were reading such a wide variety of material that my joke almost held up. That typical weekday morning found riders engrossed in all kinds of magazines, paperback books, the Daily News, the Post, the Times, office documents, a software instruction book and, yes, the Bible. Those who weren’t reading were listening to headphones, talking to others or, apparently, just thinking.

Seeing this every day on the subway set me up for a surprise one morning when I went to catch a suburban commuter train to Manhattan. I had stayed overnight in Westchester County, an upscale New York City suburb where many executives and professionals live. I would be riding into the city with lawyers headed for big corporate law firms, financial analysts going to investment banks, editors bound for publishing conglomerates, as well as accountants, doctors, engineers, public relations specialists and a host of other professionals. Boarding the train felt something like entering a library. There were no conversations even though nearly all the seats were occupied. Almost everyone was reading. But the dozens of passengers were reading only two things: the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. I could have formulated another joke about allowed reading matter, but the scene was too spooky, like the aftermath of an invasion of the body snatchers; everyone dressed the same, in suits, sitting silently in neat rows and columns, each holding up a large newspaper, absorbing the same information.

A herd of independent minds? Something seemed very wrong with this picture. It was obvious that when the subway riders and the suburban train riders converged at the workplace, the people who showed the greatest diversity in their dress, behavior and thought—the nonprofessionals—would be asked to do the least creative work, while the most regimented people would be assigned the creative tasks. This seemed just the opposite of what one might expect. And even more disturbingly, it indicated that people who do creative work are not necessarily independent thinkers.

Evidence that professionals are not independent thinkers has been around for a long time but has generally been ignored, in part because people don’t know how to make sense of it. The Vietnam War produced some revealing examples, which are worth looking back at.

On 12 January 1971, the federal government indicted Philip Berrigan and other East Coast antiwar activists on felony charges of plotting to impede the Vietnam War through violent action. The activists’ agenda supposedly included blowing up underground heating pipes in Washington to shut down government buildings, kidnapping presidential adviser Henry Kissinger to ransom him for concessions on the war and raiding draft boards to destroy records and slow down the draft.

The Justice Department prosecutors chose to hold the conspiracy trial in Harrisburg, Pennsylania, a conservative area where a randomly chosen jury would be heavily against the defendants. However, before the jury was selected at what came to be known as the Harrisburg-7 trial, a group of left-leaning social scientists supporting the defendants interviewed a large number of registered voters in the area to try to figure out how to get a sympathetic jury there. They discovered, among other things, that college-

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1 The phrase comes from an essay titled: Harold Rosenberg, “The Herd of Independent Minds,” Commentary, vol. 6, (September 1948), pp. 242–252. Note: for concision, I have eliminated almost all of the numerous, subsequent footnotes found in the original reading. Please get Schmidt’s book if you are interested in further exploring the themes of this reading. –PR
educated people were more likely than others to be conservative and to trust the government. Thus, in court, during the three weeks that it took to examine 465 potential jurors and pick a panel of 12, lawyers for the defense quietly favored skilled blue-collar workers and white-collar workers without a lot of formal education—nonprofessionals, although the sociologists and lawyers apparently never used that term.

The lawyers were uneasy doing this, however, because it went against their intuition. The notion of closed-minded hard hats and open-minded intellectuals is widespread and is reinforced by mass-media characters like loading-dock worker Archie Bunker and his college-student son-in-laws, “pinko” Mike. In fact, All in the Family made its television debut the very day of the Harrisburg indictments, 12 January 1971; by the time the trial and jury selection started, it had been on the air for a year.

Ignoring these false stereotypes paid off. The government put on a month long, $2 million extravaganza featuring 64 witnesses, including 21 FBI agents and 9 police officers. The defense called no one to the witness stand. After seven days of deliberation, the jury was not able to reach a unanimous decision and the judge declared a mistrial; but with 10 of the 12 carefully selected jurors arguing for a not-guilty verdict, the government dropped the case.

Blue-collar skeptics? Loyal intellectuals? Was the Harrisburg survey a regional fluke? Look at what the nationwide polls showed at the time. On 15 February 1970 the New York Times reported the results of a Gallup poll on the war in Vietnam. Gallup had found that the number of people in sharp disagreement with the government over the war had increased but still constituted a minority. While this increase in opposition was important news, what were particularly intriguing were the data on the opinions of subgroups of the population. These numbers announced with striking clarity that those with the most schooling were the most reluctant to criticize the government’s stand in Vietnam. There was a simple correlation (although only in part a cause-and-effect relationship): The further people had gone before leaving school, the less likely they were to break with the government over the war.…. During the war in Vietnam, nearly everyone seemed to have one or another gripe about the U.S. government’s effort, but few took positions that dissented fundamentally from the government’s goals. Some said they were for negotiations, some said they were for an end to the bombing and some simply said they were “for peace.” Gallup’s survey cut to the bottom line by posing what was always the most incisive question on the war. It asked people whether they would favor or oppose the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam.

Age didn’t affect the answers much. The ratio of those in favor to those opposed was about the same for young adults as it was for older people. But dramatic differences appeared according to formal education. Those with college educations opposed immediate withdrawal by more than two to one, whereas those not formally schooled beyond the elementary grades were evenly divided on the question. And high school graduates were in between.

Polls taken earlier and later in the Vietnam War and polls taken during other wars—Korea, for example—show the same correlation with formal education.

Gallup was not the only one to find this connection between attitude and formal education. In a study entitled A Degree and What Else? Correlates and Consequences of a College Education, sponsored by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, researchers found college graduates to be “more supportive, or ‘hawkish,’ than the rest of the population.” Even in 1968, a year of rising antiwar sentiment and militant actions against the war, people who had been to college remained less likely than others to criticize the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, the Carnegie study found.

People’s reluctance to criticize the war was not simply the result of their careful analysis of an isolated issue. Rather, the position people took on the war followed almost mechanically from their overall political outlook (although some had their overall political outlook radicalized by what they experienced when they acted to do something about the war). With Americans being killed every day, almost anything one said about the U.S. intervention in Vietnam was heard as a statement on the U.S. political, economic and social system itself, and rightly so. Thus a narrow statement against the war could elicit a broad response such as “If you don’t like it here, go to Russia!” Few now seem to remember that throughout most of the war, those who called for the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops were seen as radicals—as critics of a lot more than the war. This explains, in part, the disparity between opposition and activism—why many opponents of the war didn’t speak out publicly. More students than workers were antiwar activists, even though workers who had antiwar sentiments far outnumbered students of all persuasions. Workers organizing publicly to get the United States out of Vietnam risked a lot more—namely, their jobs—because their employers were likely to see them as radicals and therefore a threat to the tranquility of the local workforce.
The correlation between attitude and formal education is important for a book about professionals, because professionals typically have large amounts of schooling. Indeed, people in Gallup’s occupational category “professional and business workers” have attitudes similar to those of people in the top education category. (Unfortunately, Gallup has no category for professionals alone.)

The relatively uncritical stand of professionals on the issue of war is just the tip of the iceberg, for it is on the job that professionals have the greatest number of opportunities to display their ideological caution. Anyone who has ever had a job that involved interacting with professionals, or who has had to deal with doctors, lawyers, bankers or the like, has surely encountered individuals with what we might call the "professional attitude"—confident and assertive individuals who exude the feeling that they are very much at home playing by the rules and that there is no pressing need to question the social structure in which they do their work. In many individuals such identification with the system shows up in the negative: Their confidence immediately melts into fear at any suggestion of not playing by the system’s rules. (By “the system” I mean the hierarchical organization of production—the system of bosses and employees—and the social, economic and political practices that go along with it. Here and throughout the book my emphasis is on the hierarchical structure: “The system” may be read as “the hierarchy.”) And in fewer but more memorable individuals, this conservatism takes the form of elitism or pompousness, seemingly critical postures that cover for personal insecurity but involve no risk, because they compliment the system by implying that it is too egalitarian, too democratic. Whether you are a professional or a nonprofessional, you encounter the professional attitude most frequently at work—and on matters of work—not only because it is in the workplace that you are most often thrust into contact with professionals, but also because it is on the job that professionals are most sure to act like professionals.

Most importantly, it is at work that the attitude of professionals has its greatest impact, both on you as an individual and on society as a whole. Whether a given professional designs buildings, writes newspaper articles, teaches courses or develops investment strategies, she makes important decisions that affect many people. Outside of work, however, the professional’s attitude has relatively little effect on society (unless the professional makes a deliberate effort to the contrary). If, for example, you were given the power to dictate the outlook that governs the day-in-day-out decision-making of a professional at work, and I were given the power to dictate the outlook that governs what that professional does inside the voting booth once every four years, then your power to shape society would be vastly greater than mine. …

Public opinion pollsters report that professionals are more liberal than nonprofessionals on many social issues, such as civil liberties, personal morality and cultural issues. Liberal professionals smugly conclude from this that they are a force for social progress and that nonprofessionals are a conservative force in society. But the polls do not justify such a conclusion, for two reasons.

First of all, although professionals may be liberal on this or that question of the day, they tend to be very conservative on a long-standing issue of much greater importance to society: democracy. Discuss politics with a liberal professional and you will not hear a word in favor of a more democratic distribution of power in society, perhaps because in the professional’s view ignorant nonprofessionals make up the large majority of the population. Even the most liberal professionals tend toward authoritarianism in their social visions.

The second reason the polls don’t demonstrate that professionals are a more progressive force in society than are nonprofessionals is that the surveys focus on broad social questions and not on attitudes in the workplace, where both professionals and nonprofessionals exert their greatest influence over society. The nonprofessional who is conservative off the job is often not at all conservative on workplace issues and therefore is not necessarily a net conservative force in society. Similarly, the professional who is liberal off the job is often very conservative on work issues and therefore is a net conservative force in society.

Indeed, there is an enormous gap between the opinions of professionals and their professional opinions—the opinions that guide their work. When their opinions count, most professionals are conservative. Thus the engineer who believes that corruption is common among politicians in the United States freely offers that opinion. The political scientist, however, fears being quoted as saying any such thing, even though few people would find it shocking. Ask the nuclear engineer whether the nuclear industry influences reactor safety estimates, something that has long been obvious even to nonexperts, and you may get a lecture on the objectivity of mathematical calculations. And the liberal doctor who offers a cocktail party opinion against authoritarian police practices? Go to that doctor’s office with a medical problem and see her lean toward the traditional authoritarian doctor-patient relationship. Professionals are liberal on distant social issues, issues over which they have no authority at work and no influence outside of work.
Note that developments that raise doubts about the social or economic system itself are never distant issues, even when they are geographically distant and not direct issues at work. As we saw, the Vietnam War, which involved the state’s forcing people to make the highest possible sacrifice for debatable reasons, was such a crisis of legitimacy for the system. Such national crises and other anxiety-producing situations or events are immediate issues and so tend to elicit from professionals the same politically timid outlooks that guide their work.

Not surprisingly, while professionals are tolerant of distant social criticism, they have little tolerance for anyone who tries to provoke a debate about the politics that guide their own work. Noam Chomsky, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor and an outspoken critic of the state and the intellectuals who serve it, sees this firsthand when he takes a short trip down Massachusetts Avenue to Harvard University. Stepping out of the domain of conservative engineers and into the world of liberal theorists of the state and state policy, Chomsky feels a marked change in the level of tolerance for his radical democratic views. He described this to me in a letter:

By conventional measures, the Harvard faculty is much more liberal, in fact left-liberal. MIT faculty are very conservative often, even reactionary. I get along fine with the MIT faculty, even when we disagree about everything (which is the usual case). If I show up at the Harvard faculty club, you can feel the chill settle; it’s as if Satan himself entered the room.

In this book I want to examine the outlook of professionals where it matters the most, which is on immediate issues—that is, on issues where what professionals do or say affects society directly. All workplace issues are immediate, as are a few outside of work. Thus, when I speak of professionals as uncritical and ideologically obedient, I am referring not to their opinions on distant social issues, but rather to the attitudes they display at work and in their work, where their conservatism shows up in its biggest and most socially significant way. And I am referring to their attitudes toward immediate nonworkplace issues, which are issues that raise questions about the merit or strength of the larger system—questions that professionals are usually quick to play down.

I don’t mean to imply that all professionals are conservative when it counts. Some professionals do make trouble for the establishment. Although relatively few in number, such activist professionals help maintain an influential oppositional subculture in their workplaces, in their disciplines and in society. This subculture provides inspiration, encouragement and a vital safe haven for individuals whose thought deviates from the mainstream. And it gives its members the support they need to challenge their employers and others with power and to push for reform. Oppositional professionals have become increasingly influential since the 1960s, in part because of the battles fought at that time. The civil rights and antiwar movements, by successfully challenging the powers that be, helped make speech freer and the population more skeptical, conditions favorable for the opposition.

However, contrary to common belief, the number of oppositional professionals has remained relatively small. Consider, for example, college professors, who are among the most left-leaning of all professionals. Today, only about 5% of the 550,000 full-time college faculty members in the United States consider themselves to be to the left of the conservative-to-liberal mainstream. This 1-in-20 proportion of leftists hasn’t fluctuated much in at least 30 years. If the proportion seems higher than this, that may be because people who break away from the mainstream establish a presence way beyond their numbers and because radicals are speaking out more openly inside and outside of the classroom. Also, in a few disciplines in the humanities, leftists really have increased their proportion significantly—a fact that conservatives have misrepresented to make widely publicized claims that leftists have taken over higher education in the United States. The bottom line is that while the vast majority of professionals continue to share the views of corporate business executives on most basic issues, the important minority that dares to disturb the status quo has grow in influence, if not in size.

For understanding the professional, the concept of “ideology” will emerge as much more useful than that of “skill.” But what is ideology, exactly? Ideology is thought that justifies action, including routine day-to-day activity. It is your ideology that determines your gut reaction to something done, say, by the president (you feel it is right or wrong), by protesters (you feel it is justified or unjustified), by your boss (you feel it is fair or unfair), by a coworker (you feel it is reasonable or unreasonable) and so on. More importantly, your ideology justifies your own actions to yourself. Economics may bring you back to your employer day after day, but it is ideology that makes that activity feel like a reasonable or unreasonable way to spend your life.
Work in general is becoming more and more ideological, and so is the workforce that does it. As technology has made production easier, employment has shifted from factories to offices, where work revolves around inherently ideological activities, such as design, analysis, writing, accounting, marketing and other creative tasks. Of course, ideology has been a workplace issue all along: Employers have always scrutinized the attitudes and values of the people they hire, to protect themselves from unionists, radicals and others whose “bad attitude” would undermine workplace discipline. Today, however, for a relatively small but rapidly growing fraction of jobs, employers will carefully assess your attitude for an additional reason: its crucial role in the work itself. On these jobs, which are in every field, from journalism and architecture to education and commercial art, your view of the world threatens to affect not only the quantity and quality of what you produce, but also the very nature of the product. These jobs require strict adherence to an assigned point of view; and so a prerequisite for employment is the willingness and ability to exercise what I call ideological discipline.

This book is about the people who get these jobs and become members of the ideological workforce—that is, professionals. My thesis is that the criteria by which individuals are deemed qualified or unqualified to become professionals involve not just technical knowledge as is generally assumed, but also attitude—in particular, attitude toward working within an assigned political and ideological framework. I contend, for example, that all tests of technical knowledge, such as the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) or the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), are at the same time tests of attitude and that the examinations used to assess professional qualification are no exception. I consider in detail how the neutral-looking technical questions on such examinations probe the candidate’s attitude. The qualifying attitude, I find, is an uncritical, subordinate one, which allows professionals to take their ideological lead from their employers and appropriately fine-tune the outlook that they bring to their work. The resulting professional is an obedient thinker, an intellectual property whom employers can trust to experiment, theorize, innovate and create safely within the confines of an assigned ideology. The political and intellectual timidity of today’s most highly educated employees is no accident.

As attitudes and values have come to play an increasingly important role in the production of goods and services, employers have faced a choice: either hire huge numbers of managers to direct every move of the large number of employees who now do politically sensitive work, or hire employees who can be trusted politically and merely check the results of their work. Employers have pursued both strategies simultaneously. But the first one is limited by its cost, and so today every country in the world, from the United States to China, has a growing cadre of people trusted to do work that requires making decisions based not on detailed instructions but on an assigned ideology.

A long episode of the Cold War drew attention to the Soviet cadre. Beginning in the late 1940s the U.S. government beamed Voice of America radio programs directly to the people of the Soviet Union. These short-wave broadcasts were in English, Russian and a dozen minority languages spoken in the USSR. On and off from 1948 to 1987 the Soviet government operated as many as 3,000 jamming transmitters, at a cost estimated at up to half a billion dollars a year, to drown out these programs—except for the ones in English.

Never in its four decades of jamming did the Soviet government censor English-language propaganda broadcasts aimed at its population. Why? Was it simply because the number of Soviet citizens who understood English was too small to worry about? That is certainly part of the answer, but it cannot be the whole story, because no group was too small for the Soviet government to worry about. English was a standard course in the Soviet schools, and at least some of the students who did well in school and were selected to become professionals eventually learned it. The number of Soviet citizens who could understand English-language broadcasts may have been small, but so was the number who could understand many of the minority languages that were jammed, at least six of which were each spoken by less than 1.5% of the population.

The Soviets never censored the English-language propaganda broadcasts because those who spoke English were a select group of people who were trusted to maintain ideological discipline in their work (even when they were not enthusiastic about the assigned ideology). As Robert C. Tucker, a longtime student of the Soviet Union, told me; “They were more likely to be establishment people, and not dangerous.” Many of these people, such as journalists, academics and foreign service professionals, were not only trusted to hear the U.S. government’s viewpoint, but were also expected to know it so that they could answer it and not get caught off guard by it. The Soviets apparently treated the English-language broadcasts as if they were an exclusive service for their country’s ideological workforce, prepping its
members to handle any dangerous viewpoints that made it through the jamming and reached ordinary working people.

As work has become increasingly ideological, professionals have made up a growing fraction of the workforce. In the United States in 1920, only 1 employed person in 20 was a professional. By 1940, this ratio had increased to 1 in 15; by 1960 it was 1 in 12; and by 1980 it had risen to 1 in 8. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, the ratio is approaching 1 in 6 and growing rapidly. (The year 2000 began with the number of professionals approaching 22 million and total employment approaching 35 million.) …

The traditional image of the professional as an independent practicing doctor, lawyer or clergyman is misleading not only because of the proliferation of other professions, but also because very few professionals are free practitioners. The overwhelming majority are salaried employees. This has been true for many decades and is increasingly the case today as even the traditionally independent doctors and lawyers are swept into the salariat. Of every 9 professionals today, 8 are salaried employees and 1 is a free practitioner. Hence, when I use the term professional, I have salaried employees in mind. …

A system of production that divides its nonmanagement workforce into two distinct components—employees trusted to follow an assigned ideology in their work and employees not trusted to do so—clearly takes ideology very seriously. In fact, this system, now nothing less than a world system, gives questions of ideology highest priority. It must do so because of its increasing vulnerability in the face of a more and more politically sophisticated population, and it does so within each and every corporate or governmental division and at all levels of administration within these units. As a result, you cannot make sense of the system as a whole, the organization that employs you, or even your own job, just from a list of the goods and services being produced; understanding, now more than ever, means knowing the very carefully construed ideologies that are guiding the production and that are being advanced through it. …

Furthermore, professionals are the role models of the society towards which we are heading, a society in which ideology trumps gender, race and class origin as the biggest factor underlying the individual’s success or failure. The victories of the feminist, civil rights and union movements of the past century have moved us closer to such a society. Thus, employers, led by the big corporations, are striving to ensure the survival of their precious hierarchical system of production by making it an equal opportunity system, which means subjecting employees to ideological scrutiny without sexist, racist or elitist discrimination. In the process, the corporations reveal what is most important to them and draw attention to the essential characteristics of the people who pass the strictest version of their scrutiny—professionals.

THE POLITICS OF NOT GETTING POLITICAL

(Excerpt from Chapter 2)

Doctor, lawyer, teacher, scientist, psychologist, economist, engineer, professor: What makes an individual a professional?

Technical knowledge and skill come to mind immediately. But there must be more to it than that, because the worker who picks up technical knowledge and skill on the job does not get reclassified as a professional.

With few exceptions, the professional is a product of the schools. The fact that off-the-job schoolings is what makes the difference between the professional and the nonprofessional is curious, because professionals-in-training often complain that much of the prescribed study is “irrelevant” to the technical knowledge and skills they will actually need to do the job. Students feel frustrated by the numerous “extra” requirements that they must fulfill to be allowed to work and that seem to constitute an unnecessary obstacle course….

If the seemingly irrelevant material is, in fact, irrelevant, then employers would be foolish to insist on hiring people with paper credentials when they could hire equally skilled nonprofessionals at much lower salaries.

Of course, employers are not being foolish when they insist on credentials. Professionals do something for them that skilled nonprofessionals cannot do. As a look at some examples will illustrate, employers can trust professionals to uphold the right outlook in their creative work.

Consider the school teacher. Those who employ teachers see them as more than workers who present the official curriculum to the students. A computer or television system could make such a presentation. An important role of the schools is socialization: the promulgation of an outlook, attitudes and values. For example, the schools prepare students for the labor force not just by teaching them arithmetic, English, history and so on, but also by teaching them to follow instructions, adhere to a rigid time schedule,
respect authority and tolerate boredom. Lessons in this “hidden curriculum” are taught as much in the numerous school-student interactions not involving the official curriculum as in those interactions that do. The employer trusts the teaching professional to manage these interactions in such a way as to advance the proper values. The professional is one who can be trusted to extrapolate to new situations the ideology inherent in the official school curriculum that she teaches.

As a professional, the teacher is “objective” when presenting the school curriculum: She doesn’t “take sides,” or “get political.” However the ideology of the status quo is built into the curriculum. The professional’s objectivity, then, boils down to not challenging this built-in ideology.

It is revealing that teachers who do question the curriculum attract the attention of school administrators, while teachers who are simply incompetent at teaching it tend to be ignored. (Indeed, when teachers are fired it is rarely for not teaching well.) “Legitimate” professional questions for teachers concern not what they should be doing politically in the classroom—the professional has an internalized willingness and ability to be directed in this area—but how best to convey the material in the official curriculum. In this alone, teachers are expected to use their creativity, and the awards of the profession go to those who do best.

Consider the cop. Robots could conceivably enforce the “letter of the law” and keep extremely busy doing so because of the abundance of infractions that occur. However, mindless enforcement would achieve the law’s goals only very crudely, if at all, and that is why law enforcers must be professionals. Professionals are hired to enforce the “spirit of the law”—the spirit in which the letter is written. Only the professional is trusted to sense, for example, which of the multitude of minor violations of the “letter” are acts of defiance against the “spirit” and therefore call for a response.

It may not seem very radical to say that the spirit of the law is to defend the status quo. However, the police adamantly deny playing anything but a neutral role in society. Nothing reveals better the actual partisan role of the police and the priority they give to the law’s spirit over its letter than do the thousands of “attitude crimes” that draw punishment every day in this country. An attitude crime is behavior that violates the spirit of the law, whether or not it also violates the letter. Maintaining a discourteous or disrespectful manner when pulled over by the police, for example, is not illegal, but it can get you a traffic citation instead of a warning, because the spirit of the law says “respect authority.” Similarly, subservience can sometimes get you off with a warning even though you’ve violated the letter of the law by, say, loitering. But if you talk back to the cops, the very same loitering can lead to handcuffs and it night in jail, especially if you are black or Latino. Surely many of the estimated 20,000 instances of police brutality in the United States each year are “provoked” by the suspect’s less-than-deferential attitude.

In 1980, statistics came to light in San Diego County indicating as many as 700 “attitude arrests” there each month. This figure included only cases in which arrestees were released hours or days later with no charges filed. The figure would have been much higher had it included arrests in which the police filed contrived charges as well as arrests for minor violations in which the police filed additional or more serious charges because of the violator’s attitude, a practice known as “overbooking.”

One San Diegan, Edward Lawson, was repeatedly stopped, frisked and arrested, often violently, solely because of his attitude. Lawson enjoyed walking in pretty residential areas, but as a black man with dreadlocks strolling through wealthy white neighborhoods at odd hours, he would be stopped frequently for questioning by the police. Lawson would demand to know why he was being stopped, but the cops were not interested in giving explanations. When Lawson would press his demand, he often found himself thrown in the back of a squad car with his hands manacled behind him. While Lawson’s demand was not illegal, it violated the spirit of the law, which says “know your place.”

Punishment for attitude crimes is rampant today. In California alone, police in 1997 made over 85,000 arrests in which they released the arrested individuals without filing charges, mainly because of lack of evidence. An even larger number of cases were thrown out by prosecutors before trial. Sixty-one percent of the individuals given the arrest-and-release treatment by police were minorities.

From employment law to landlord/tenant law to tax law to property law, the spirit of the law is to maintain the privileges of the wealthy. Yet the letter of the law is seemingly neutral on the question. “The lawn, in its majestic equality,” observed Anatole France, “forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal bread.” Nevertheless, those who enforce the law tend to see the wealthy as “good guys” and tend to be suspicious of people without property. This is not because police are inherently biased people but because they have to take up the spirit of the law to do a professional job enforcing it. The professional’s “objective” enforcement of the law boils down to acting in accord with no ideology...
other than the one built into the law. A cop who challenges the law’s built-in bias in favor of the status quo would quickly attract the attention of higher-ups. But this is rarely a problem, because the law enforcement professional is tuned more to following orders than to grappling with moral questions. The police officer’s “legitimate” professional questions concern not the nature of the social hierarchy that the law defends, but how best to enforce the law that defends it.

Consider the shrink. Many mental problems originate not in diseases of the brain but in deficiencies of society. The arduousness of living with unfulfilling work, financial insecurity, arbitrary bosses, lack of solidarity and insufficient personal power, together with the anguish caused by racism, sexism, ageism, lookism, ableism and all the other oppressive hierarchies that plague this society, helps explain the fact that more than 10% of the population (and not counting those with substance abuse disorders) suffers from mental or emotional problems. There are enough troubled individuals in the United States to keep busy 100,000 psychiatrists and clinical psychologists and a much larger number of clinically trained social workers and other mental health professionals. People’s mental problems often appear as deviations from social or legal norms and therefore are problems for the status quo as well as for the deviant individuals.

The problems of both would be solved if troubled individuals abided by the values of the status quo, and of course the mainstream mental health system more often than not works to alter behavior in that direction. But attempting to adjust people to the unhealthy society that caused their problems in the first place may not always be the healthiest approach for either the individuals or society. A simple alternative would be to help some troubled individuals bring out, clarify and sharpen their implicit critique—to strengthen them for the struggle in which they are engaged instead of removing them from it, because the struggle can be both therapeutic for the individual and beneficial to society. But the institutions of mental health, such as hospitals that employ psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, are institutions of the status quo. They are not about to turn the troubled into troublemakers, no matter how healthful that might be. The mental health professional is someone that such an employer can trust to move confused people away from struggle with social norms and authority and toward a life in which they are “well adjusted” to their place in the socioeconomic hierarchy.

As professionals, psychotherapists are “nonpartisan” in their work: They just help ill people get better. But to declare extreme nonconformity an illness, as psychology professionals do, is a partisan act because of the down-on-the-victim therapeutic framework it rationalizes: “Treating ‘sick’ individuals” is a much more politically conservative framework than is “treating individuals troubled by a sick and oppressive society.” Evidently it is not the place of the clinicians to question the health of the society to which the patient must be adjusted. Their “legitimate” professional concern is how best to bring about the adjustment. In this alone, they are expected to use their creativity. The few who do raise questions are seen as “getting political,” even though it is hard to imagine how they could get any more political than mainstream clinical psychology itself, which often practices conservative social action disguised as medical treatment.

As the above examples illustrate, the failure of professionals to question the politics built into their work serves the interests of those who have power in society and helps maintain the social and economic status quo. But refraining from questioning doesn’t look like a political act, and so professionals give the appearance of being politically neutral in their work.

Nevertheless, the public is becoming increasingly savvy about at least one way in which professionals support the system through their work. People are beginning to understand that the intellectual worker’s “professional judgment” or “expert opinion” is not objective as it claims, but rather favors the interest of his or her employer. (Supporting one’s employer and supporting the larger system are not the same thing, but because it is basically a corporate system, each boosts the other.) The public most easily recognizes the political tilt of professionals toward their employers when it is blatant. Thus, not many people today are surprised at the Johns-Manville Corporation doctors, whose medical findings for decades helped the asbestos producer suppress information on the deadly health hazard posed by the “miracle mineral.” Similarly, many people immediately questioned the scientific opinion of a group of distinguished physicists arguing in favor of nuclear power when it was revealed that the physicists were connected to the nuclear industry and major corporations. And today people may be outraged, but they are no longer surprised, when an HMO medical director—a doctor in a business suit—hustles patients out of the hospital very soon after major surgery, even when common sense indicates further close monitoring.
Expert witnesses in big-money court cases draw further attention to reason’s eager subordination to power. Today only the most naive observers are surprised when reputable experts from the same field contradict one another under oath. In high-stakes trials each side can afford the best experts money can buy, and these experts often turn out to be big names in their fields.

Finally, consider the university professors who have received research grants from tobacco companies to study the health effects of cigarettes. These independent medical researchers, whose names are often followed by the letters “MD, PhD,” are typically well-respected, highly prolific scientists at prestigious institutions such as Harvard University. Many have served on presidential or other high-level government advisory committees. For decades these scientists have served their sponsors’ interests by finding tobacco to be safe and nonaddictive, and by attacking studies that find otherwise. In scientific journals, at scientific conferences, in press releases to the mass media, at congressional hearings and as expert witnesses in court, these doctors have given their professional opinion that cigarettes are not dangerous. Their views fly in the face of estimates, by public health scientists with no connection to the tobacco industry, that smoking kills 1,200 people per day in the United States.

In addition to their grantees, the tobacco companies also have scientists working for them directly. Over the years, a very tiny minority of these researchers have pushed behind the scenes to make public some of their findings critical of tobacco. But they typically did not push very hard and did not leak their findings to warn the public.

It took a socially conscious nonprofessional to show what needed to be done. In 1994 a paralegal who worked for a law firm representing a tobacco company, acting under the name “Mr. Butts” … sent 4,000 pages of secret tobacco company documents to an antismoking activist. These revealing “Cigarette papers” show how embarrassingly easy it is for a well-heeled organization to get what it wants from reputable scientists.

The strategy of the tobacco companies has been to use scientists to make the dangers of cigarettes look controversial. The companies depend upon the fact that many observers hearing the word “scientist” naively think “nonpartisan.” Thus the head of the Council for Tobacco Research, which was the major health research organization of the tobacco industry, told Congress, “We are scientists and we seek scientific truth.” However, as the public has grown more aware of the need to ask for whom experts are working, the tobacco industry has found it increasingly difficult—but not yet impossible—to use its contrarian scientists to get people to think “controversial” when they hear about research findings that implicate tobacco in disease and death.

When employers designate certain jobs “professional” and insist that employees have professional training—not just the technical skills that seem sufficient to do the work—they must have more in mind than efficiency. Hierarchical organizations need professionals, because through professionals those at the top control the political content of what is produced, and because professionals contribute to the bosses’ control of the workforce itself. It is crucial for the functioning and survival of the institution—and the hierarchical system of production as a whole—that the employees who make decisions do so in the interest of the employer. As we will see, the employer’s control of the political content of the professional’s creative work is assured by the ideological discipline developed during professional training. And the employer’s control of the workforce is maintained in part through the professional’s elitism and support for hierarchy in the workplace. The preparation process develops, and the qualification process measures, the students willingness and ability to accept ideological direction from future employers. The one who has met the requirements—the “qualified professional”—can be trusted to do what is “politically correct” when making decisions and creative choices at work.

Professionals sell to their employers more than their ordinary labor power, their ability to carry out instructions. They also sell their ideological labor power, their ability to extend those instructions to new situations. It is this sale that distinguishes them from nonprofessionals, who sell only their ordinary labor power. Those in charge can trust professionals to make some decisions that must be made ideologically; nonprofessionals are trusted to make only decisions that can be made mechanically. Professionals implement their employers’ attitudes as well as their employers’ lists of instructions; nonprofessionals are only required to implement the instructions.

Ideological workers are more expensive than non-ideological workers, because they require a greater amount of formal education. The same economic forces that drive employers to replace nonprofessionals with machines (which initially bring higher profits) also drive them to reduce the
Professional's basic ability to be creative in their work. In many jobs, the more closely the employees follow set workplace procedures and any special instructions for the tasks at hand, the happier the bosses are. Nonprofessionals know that they risk getting in trouble when they innovate to get the job done.

Professionals, on the other hand, are required to be creative in their work but within strict political limits. Their creativity must serve their employers’ interests, which often are not the same as their own interests, the interests of clients or customers or the public interest. Thus the corporate PR specialist assigned to field questions about pollution, defective products, the treatment of employees and other sensitive issues creatively uses the truth to paint a pro-company picture…. Employers don’t have time to decide every minor issue that affects their political or economic interests, and so they seek to hire others who will do things as if they had done them themselves. Thus, professionals control the technical means but not the social goals of their creative work. The professional’s lack of control over the political content of his or her creative work is the hidden root of much career dissatisfaction.

To say that professionals are ideological workers is not to say that they formulate the ideology in the first place, for they do not. Professionals have no more control over the ideology they propagate than nonprofessionals have over the design of the products they produce. Professionals merely have an operational grasp of the ideology inherent in their occupation’s actual role in society. Employers trust them to use that ideology to extrapolate policy and handle new problems as they arise, and to do so without constant supervision. Professionals are licensed to think on the job, but they are obedient thinkers.

All professional work is in part creative. However, individuals are selected to do professional work not because they are more creative than others, but because they can be trusted to make sure every detail of what they create is politically correct from their employers’ points of view. As human beings, professionals are not more creative than nonprofessionals. In fact, professional training tends to kill off natural creativity: In the corporate headquarters building you can often find more creativity down in the mail room than upstairs in the office of a lawyer, systems engineer or financial analyst, but it is untamed. Employers will hire dull but politically disciplined individuals over those displaying any amount of politically undisciplined creativity.

Just as professionals engage in playpen creativity, innovating within the safe confines of an assigned ideology, so too they engage in playpen critical thinking. Their work involves judging whether or not the ideas of others are in line with the favored outlook, but does not involve developing their own, independent point of view. Hence professionals tend to be what might be called “book review” critical, which is intellectually and politically safe because it doesn’t involve developing or taking a stand for an independent outlook. Professionals generally avoid the risk inherent in real critical thinking and cannot properly be called critical thinkers. They are simply ideologically disciplined thinkers. Real critical thinking means uncovering and questioning social, political and moral assumptions; applying and refining a personally developed worldview; and calling for action that advances a personally created agenda. An approach that backs away from any of these three components lacks the critical spirit.

Ideologically disciplined thinkers, especially the more gung-ho ones, often give the appearance of being critical thinkers as they go around deftly applying the official ideology and confidently reporting their judgments. The fact that professionals are usually more well-informed than nonprofessionals contributes to the illusion that they are critical thinkers.

Perhaps no one draws more attention to the political component of professional work than does the lawyer. All professionals give highest priority to making sure the right interests are served. Most professionals do this political work quietly as they much more visibly exercise technical skills that the public sees as nonpolitical: treating illness, informing readers, catching criminals, teaching children how to add and subtract, doing scientific research, developing new technology, designing whatever. For lawyers, however, the perception is reversed, because watching out for the right interests is not only their highest priority but also an unusually large part of what they do. Lawyers exercise the professional’s basic ability to sense interests, but, unlike other professionals, they exercise no other skill more prominently.

Indeed, lawyering involves such a high ratio of political work to technical work that technical knowledge is something of an afterthought in the training of lawyers. Yes, law schools do organize
instruction around memorizing and applying specific principles of law, but this is done primarily as an exercise to teach proficiency at adopting and working within assigned ideologies. As Talbot D’Alember te, former president of the American Bar Association and a critic of legal education told me, in law school the law is just it vehicle to teach a way of thinking. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of this is that students fresh out of law school—even those graduating at the top of their classes—do not feel they have the technical knowledge necessary to pass the bar examination. They must spend a couple thousand dollars to take an intensive six- to eight-week “bar review” course to learn what they need to know to pass the test and get their permit to practice law.

The emphasis on ideological skills in law school is precisely what the powerful corporate law firms want, because the high-stakes legal battles they fight defending big business and wealthy clients are paramountly political. The simple ability to recite the law does not qualify one to do this work. Representing powerful clients requires lawyers who can make creative arguments about the intent of the law, who can find ways to argue that the public interest would be served by a favorable ruling, and who can sway public opinion in high-profile cases, where this opinion influences the outcome. Settling losing cases out of court is political work, too. Lawyers for the powerful must know, for example, to give high priority to negotiating clauses that keep the terms of the settlement secret, this to protect the corporation’s or rich person’s public image and to avoid setting a precedent that would help other wronged parties to obtain justice. Thus the big laws firms aren’t primarily interested in the technical skills of the law school graduates they hire. Those skills are easily picked up on the job; an ideologically disciplined mind is not. Similarly, the firms don’t care much about bar exam scores. In fact, the large firms typically hire law school graduates before they even take the bar exam.

Lawyers have a negative public image because, unlike other professionals, they don’t exercise socially redeeming technical skills. For this reason, they are seen as people who take without giving—a nonproductive element of society. Lawyers themselves, especially those at the big firms, make little pretense of doing work that benefits the public at large. Thus, more than other professionals, they feel the need to reserve some of their time to work “pro bono publico”—for the public good. (Most social workers, teachers, journalists, sociologists, scientists and other professionals would feel insulted if you asked them whether they set aside any working time to help make the world a better place.) In the words of Judge Laurence H. Silberman of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, “Lawyers really see pro bono services as the penance they pay for serving a capitalist system.”

Perhaps the most widely distributed between-the-lines writing is the handiwork of journalists. The news stories they write for the front page of your daily newspaper are chock full of subtext. This becomes clear when different reporters describe the same event, because then their descriptions differ in substance only by what they have written between the lines.

On 1 March 1993, for example, the lead stories in both the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal covered the same topic: what had been learned about the World Trade Center bombing, which had occurred three days earlier. The article in the Times began with these words: “The bomb that devastated the garage under the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan on Friday apparently was …” The article in the Journal began like this: “The bomb blast that drilled a four-story hole in a primary symbol of American commerce was …” Clearly, the words in the Times played down the effect of the bomb—it destroyed a garage. Why was the destruction of a garage the top news story in the world, three days after it happened? The Journal answers this question up front.

What the Times and Journal reporters wrote between the lines here was no accident, but adhered closely to each paper’s editorial outlook. And in each case that outlook is just what one would expect. The Times is written for a readership of professionals, who need ideological direction and reassurance of the system’s strength. The Journal is written for bosses—business owners and executives—who give direction and do not need to be reminded where their interests lie. Among Journal subscribers, managers, outnumber professionals more than three to one. Among Times readers, professionals outnumber managers three to two.

**JURORS: PROFESSIONALS FOR A WEEK**  
*(Excerpt from Chapter 3)*

Every year, more than a million nonprofessionals get a taste of what it is like to be a professional—when they serve on jury duty. Jury work involves decision making, and so it should be no surprise that the government gives potential jurors a quick, essentials-only version of the special processing described in the
previous chapter. As a result, the juror’s courtroom adventure bears an uncanny resemblance to professional selection, training and employment, with the whole process speeded up to such a degree that days represent years. A look at the familiar drill of jury duty reveals what those in charge want most in their decision-makers, and it sets the stage for understanding the conflicts that surround selection for professional school, professional training after selection and professional work itself.

The first order of business in a trial is probing the attitudes and values of potential jurors through questioning and demographic analysis. Based on the results of this ideological assessment, each candidate is either weeded out or selected to serve on the jury. Favored are people who are programmable but not already programmed. (Thus professionals, who are loaded with ideological baggage from their fields and jobs, are often excluded.) Those selected are then subjected to a whirlwind indoctrination in which the judge impresses upon them that they must accept the law as it is given to them and follow that law rather than their own sense of right and wrong. The judge exhorts jurors not to let their views about the merit of the law affect their work. In the most typical words of the court, the guest professionals are told to judge only “the facts of the case, not the law.” Jurors who favor decriminalization of marijuana, for example, are expected to vote for conviction anyway if, by their judgment, the defendant really was caught smoking the contraband, as charged. Thus, jurors are expected to exercise judgment, but within an assigned ideological framework that they are forbidden to question—just like professionals. For professionals, of course, their employers’ ideologies play the role of the law.

However, there is an important difference between jurors and real employed professionals: Jurors have greater freedom to criticize the assigned framework of values and to act on their own sense of right and wrong. Unlike professional employees, jurors can follow their consciences without worrying about losing their jobs or losing the favor of people who have power over them. If jurors think that justice demands it, they have the right to violate the court’s instructions and judge whether the law itself is unjust or misapplied: they are not held in contempt of court for doing that. In fact, such “nullification of the law” by juries has a long and glorious history. Before the Civil War, for example, some northern juries found both slaves and abolitionists “not guilty” of violating the fugitive slave laws, even though their violation of these laws was clear.

Today the government’s approach to the “problem” of such independent juries is simply to try to prevent jurors from learning that they have the right to criticize the law. As a result, obedient jurors can sometimes be seen after trials apologizing to defendants whom they didn’t really want to convict, saying they had no choice. But not all jurors are obedient. This is because the courthouse system of ideological weeding out and indoctrination doesn’t work perfectly, mainly because it is so rushed. Thus, even when prosecutors have an airtight case, juries that are uncomfortable with the law or the way the law is being used don’t always convict. Sometimes these juries openly criticize the law. But much more often they choose to convince themselves that there is reasonable doubt in the evidence, because they are ignorant of their right to question the law or timid about asserting that right. …

Members of the Fully Informed Jury Association, a national organization with headquarters in Montana, are dedicated to educating people about their rights and responsibilities as trial jurors. These activists argue that jurors have a moral responsibility to judge the law and the way the law is being used, in the interest of social justice and as a check on those with power. I argue that for the same reasons, all professionals, not just temporary ones, must sit in judgment of the social goals they have been recruited to further.

**SUBORDINATION**

(Excerpt from Chapter 13)

“The (expletive deleted) computers.” When an interviewer asked young nuclear weapons designers at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory to name the worst thing about their profession, this gripe about uncooperative computers was a typical answer. The goddamn computers. They don’t have enough capacity and they’re always going down. What’s a designer of weapons of mass destruction to do?

The physicists’ startlingly narrow answers were not the result of any pressure to respond quickly, without giving careful consideration to the question—the interviewer reports that nearly all of them did think for a while before answering. Rather, a narrow focus comes naturally to such individuals, who, as good products of the system of professional training, give higher priority to carrying out their assignments than to questioning them, and in any case are not prepared to second-guess the political and ideological framework that engenders and guides their technical work. In the final analysis, the physicists’ narrow answers are a sad sign of their subordination, of their approval of a work life that will ultimately give them
insufficient satisfaction: a work life in which their employers define the big picture and they innovate safely within it, and in which attempting to alter the picture is not a legitimate on-the-job activity.

If an individual professional did have an independent political agenda, it would undermine the ideological discipline and assignable curiosity that ensure that he works in his employers interest. This is why the system of professional training, and the examination that stands at the center of that system, favors the individual who sees himself as having a technical orientation rather than a political one. Of course, the technical is itself political—the technically best solution to a given problem is often one thing from the point of view of those with an interest in maintaining the hierarchy but something quite different from the point of view of those without power. However, the favored individual sees no class interest in his own work: Because he internalizes the requisite ideology, he doesn’t see himself as following an ideology at all, but as simply doing what he judges to be technically best.

Having long ago purged himself of his political agenda, and having internalized the dominant ideology, the expert sees the problems of the world as fundamentally technical in nature (although certainly exacerbated by politics, but not the other way around). As a 28-year-old Livermore physicist working on third-generation nuclear weapons (which aim to knock out attacking nuclear weapons) said about the buildup of nuclear arsenals, “Why not find technical solutions to a technical problem?” Whatever the issue, the rebel and the expert stand out in sharp distinction to each other. In any discussion, the expert’s lack of political independence—his loyalty—becomes apparent immediately, as he confines his thinking to technical solutions—making adjustments, fine-tuning the system. He may offer a multitude of ways to deal with a problem, but, as if by magic, not a single one would reduce the flow of profits or otherwise disturb the hierarchical distribution of power.

Professionalism—in particular the notion that experts should confine themselves to their “legitimate professional concerns” and not “politicize” their work—helps keep individual professionals in line by encouraging them to view their narrow technical orientation as a virtue, a sign of objectivity rather than of subordination. This doesn’t mean that experts are forbidden to let independent political thoughts cross their minds. They can do so as citizens, of course, and they can even do so as experts, but then only in the “proper” places and in the “proper” way. The expert is probably a member of a professional association that has a “committee on social implications” or a “forum on the profession and society.” Such a group may take up a political issue, but only after it takes a debilitating bow to power, usually in the form of a protracted debate in which those who want to take up the issue must succeed in repackaging it as a “legitimate professional concern,” often as a technical issue. Members of the group can then take a position on the sanitized issue without “being political” in the sense of acting like they don’t know their place. Politically timid professionals fear that their organization will look like part of a social movement and so they try to limit their organization’s actions to those of a narrow special-interest group.

As part of their very identity, professionals subordinate themselves to power on ideological matters. Thus, professionals can’t take a stand on an unsanitized issue without going through a genuine identity crisis. Indeed, they respond with great fear and trembling whenever anyone proposes that they take such a stand. Even on life-or-death issues, professional associations can rarely muster the courage to take a position that they think might displease employers. Professionals don’t want anyone to think that their own views might affect their work, because that would be insubordinate and therefore unprofessional. So even off the job (in professional associations and elsewhere), independence of thought feels out of line. As a result, the typical professional doesn’t stand for anything.

Thus, for example, it was sad but not surprising when the National Lesbian and Gay journalists Association decided not to participate in the massive 25 April 1993 gay rights march on Washington, an event that drew several hundred thousand people, making it one of the largest civil rights demonstrations in American history. Leroy Aarons, the group’s president, explained that members didn’t want to endanger their “credibility in the industry.” As good little professionals they adjust their very identity for their employers: Both on and off the job they act like journalists who happen to be gay, not like gays who happen to work as journalists.

Consider the behavior of the National Association of Black Journalists in the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal, a well-known journalist convicted of killing a Philadelphia police officer. A passionate voice for the black community, Abu-Jamal had worked as a radio and print journalist, doing news reports and commentary for a number of radio stations and networks, including National Public Radio, which aired his pieces on All Things Considered. The incident that landed Abu-Jamal in prison occurred in 1981, while he was president of the Philadelphia chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists. Late one night
Abu-Jamal happened upon the scene where a police officer had stopped Abu-Jamal’s brother for a traffic violation. In the events that followed, the officer shot Abu-Jamal and was fatally shot himself. There is no agreement about who fired first or who shot the officer. Many people felt that Abu-Jamal, a radical and longtime activist with no criminal record, did not receive a fair trial. But years of appeals through the courts were fruitless, and on 1 June 1995 the governor of Pennsylvania ordered prison officials to kill Abu-Jamal by lethal injection at 10 p.m. on 17 August 1995.

This touched off a worldwide outcry involving hundreds of thousands of people. Demonstrations, rallies, teach-ins, celebrity speak-outs, op-ed articles, and letter-writing and petition campaigns—100,000 signers in Rome alone—demanded that Abu-Jamal at least be granted a new trial. Scores of organizations—from Amnesty international and Human Rights Watch to the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—supported this demand and opposed Abu-Jamal’s impending execution.

But not the National Association of Black Journalists. In a written statement following a vote by the group’s 18-member board of directors, NABJ president Dorothy Butler Gilliam said: “As an organization of journalists, [NABJ] does not see this unfortunate circumstance as an issue of journalism upon which it feels compelled to take a stand at this time.” In spite of Gilliam’s attempt to make her position sound more reasonable by calling NABJ “an organization of journalists” rather than an organization of blacks, the group’s stand infuriated many people, especially the black community. One critic spoke for them all when he attributed the groups decision to its domination by members “attuned to the subtle grunts and imagined nods of their employers in the corporate media.” In response to the barrage of criticism that it received, the NABJ latched onto and took an extra-strong stand on a sanitized issue: restrictions that prison officials had put on Abu-Jamal’s communication with the outside world after he contracted to write Live From Death Row (Addison-Wesley, 1995), a book sharply critical of the justice and prison system. Thus the NABJ was “outraged” not because the state planned to kill Abu-Jamal, but because it was violating his First Amendment rights, “which we find to be a legitimate issue,” the group explained.

The judge in charge of Abu-Jamal’s case was a tough, cop-on-the-bench type who had sentenced 32 people to death—more than twice as many as any other judge in the country. He had never before granted a stay of execution and was, in the words of the New York Times, “openly contemptuous” of Abu-Jamal. Yet, ten days before the planned execution, he succumbed to the growing popular pressure and granted Abu-Jamal an indefinite stay, allowing Abu-Jamal’s lawyers to appeal once again to higher courts for a new trial.

Generally speaking, the greater the power, whether corporate or state or even oppositional, the more eager professionals are to subordinate themselves to it. The power’s morality or immorality usually has only a secondary effect on the professional’s eagerness to serve, because good subordinates don’t make moral judgments about their superiors. This is the unfortunate but invaluable lesson of history. Historian Konrad Jarausch notes, for example, that “in the spring of 1933, most German professionals rushed to curry favor with the new Nazi government.” The prestigious German engineering association, the prominent lawyers association, the secondary teachers association and hundreds of other groups all across Germany pledged their loyalty. The behavior of people in my own field, physics, has been far from exemplary. Before and during World War II, the world’s top physicists were German, and these individuals typically accepted invitations to work in support of the Nazi war effort. Two decades later, during the Vietnam War, the world’s top physicists were American, and these individuals typically jumped at the invitation to become members of the Defense Department’s Jason organization and work in support of the U.S. side in Vietnam. (Jason is still active.)

At the workplace, experts can be somewhat independent in informal discussions, but almost never within their professional work itself; it is considered “unprofessional” for experts to bring independent political thinking to bear in their work. On the job, their “legitimate professional concerns” are largely confined to carrying out their assignments. Thus, while some of the nuclear weapons designers mentioned at the beginning of this chapter worried about computer troubles, others—also well trained in confining themselves to their “legitimate professional concerns”—worried that international agreements might further restrict testing and thereby make it more difficult for them to carry out their assignment of weapons design. They did not allow the notion that such restrictions on nuclear testing might actually represent social progress to interfere with their work.

This view of what is legitimate holds hegemony over professionals in every major area of their employment. It is extreme in some cases, such as the aerospace industry, employer of thousands of
scientists; the very notion of an aerospace scientist bringing a critical social perspective to his work is so unusual as to be jarring. The social function of the individual produced by the qualification system is to work uncritically within the political hierarchy, bolstering it through his example of eager participation as well as through his actual work product. When the professional leaves unchallenged the moral authority of his employer to dictate the political content of his work, he surrenders his social existence, his control over the mark he makes on the world.

These days one finds students and professionals who have some awareness of the big picture but who cynically adjust their behavior for the system. This is quite acceptable to the hierarchy because these individuals, even as they blast distant power figures such as the president, carefully avoid any confrontation with those who hold immediate power over there. As Max Horkheimer said in 1946, in what may be taken as one of the most succinct criticisms of many professionals on today’s postmodern scene, “Well-informed cynicism is only another mode of conformity.”

However, more than professionalism or cynicism, it is lack of social vision that assures conformity, and professional training does anything but produce people who envision a more democratic social order. Professionals may complain to you about the unfair treatment that they witness firsthand at work, and they may tell you in excruciating detail about the latest cases of corruption in business and government, just as they read it in the newspaper. But most of them are unable to move from concern to action. Professionals are angry about such abuses of power, but having no vision of how power in the schools, in the workplace and in the larger society could he distributed more democratically, they naturally look for ways to make the present hierarchical power structures work. Here the choices are limited—restaff the hierarchy with “better people” or give those at the top even more power so they can “act decisively.” So even the most well-meaning individuals end up reinventing some such elitist or authoritarian solution.

Group action by the rank and file is disobedient and antithetical to making hierarchical authority structures work, so many professionals who are well-informed and concerned about abuses of power will nevertheless not engage in collective acts of solidarity with the victims. They don’t seek solidarity even when they themselves are the victims, and it is not unusual to see them leave their jobs rather than speak out openly and improve the situation through collective action. For the same reason, then will not identify with a specific movement or work with organizations that have independent social agendas.

Those who have no vision of greater democracy are paralyzed even further by the individualism inherent in their outlook. They retreat in fear at the mere suggestion of joining with others in struggle, for those act as part of a group admit to being less than autonomous individuals and give up the comforting fiction that they meet their bosses as equals.

The sad fact is, mainstream professionals don’t need political freedom to do their creative work. And they don’t demand that their employers allow them to exercise political freedom in their work. Only when professionals have an independent political agenda do they need and demand freedom, because only then might their creative work displease their employers.

Scientists are a good example. During Josef Stalin’s reign of terror in the Soviet Union, tens of thousands of scientists and engineers were arrested, imprisoned and sometimes executed. Yet Soviet science advanced rapidly and came to lead the world in many fields, including mathematics and theoretical physics. Until the mid-1950s, some of the Soviet Union’s most eminent scientists worked in prison laboratories. At the height of the repression, Soviet physicists did work that won them five Nobel prizes. One of those physicists, a Soviet citizen named Pyotr Kapitsa, had been living in England for thirteen years when, upon a routine visit to the Soviet Union to attend a conference, Soviet authorities seized him on Stalin’s orders and wouldn’t let him return home to England. Within a few years of this kidnapping, Stalin had Kapitsa running a Soviet laboratory and doing the most creative work of his career.

As Loren H. Graham, a science historian at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has documented, scientists do not require academic freedom to do their creative work—they just need funding. One haunting image that Graham describes is that of the young scientist Andrei Sakharov sitting at his desk at Arzamas-16 doing his famous work in theoretical physics and gazing out the window at brutal armed guards marching rows of political prisoners to their jobs at the scientific installation, which was the Soviet equivalent of Los Alamos National Laboratory in the United States. Years later Sakharov became a dissident, but that was unusual for a scientist. As Graham notes, even when the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse, the leaders of Soviet science sided with the old order.

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