

TEXTURES *of* PLACE

Exploring
Humanist Geographies

*Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher,
and Karen E. Till, Editors*



University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London

THE FRAGMENTED INDIVIDUAL AND THE ACADEMIC REALM

Michael Curry

We have heard a great deal lately about “distance learning” in higher education. And we have heard, too, about other developments occurring within the university, changes as seemingly diverse as the rise of postmodernism, the penetration of corporate money into the interstices of the institution, the focus on new technologies, and pressures for and against affirmative action.

If these developments have occurred against the background of the idea of the university as an “ivory tower,” those who have commented on them have in fact typically failed to see that the traditional ivory tower was a *place*. And they have failed in the process to see that it was only within the ivory tower as a place that certain of the features that we see as most characteristic of academics could make sense.

In what follows, I shall argue that the university has at least over the last one hundred years been a place of a very special sort, one in which academic professionals were able to represent themselves as in some sense “placeless,” and that recent developments have in various ways begun to undercut the possibility of its remaining such a place.

On the Professions

As Bruce Kimball has shown, there have been

six “moments” in the rhetoric of “profession,” six changes in the usage of “profession” and its cognates. First was the extension of “profession” from referring to a religious vow to denoting the group who made the vow, especially, the “secular” clergy. Second was the shift in reference from the clergy to dignified, non-religious occupations. Third was the introduction of the terms “learned professions” and “liberal professions,” which identified certain dignified occupations. Fourth was the displacement of “professed” by “professional” as the adjective denoting “occupational” or “vocational.” Fifth was the introduction of the noun “professional” to replace “professor,” which was narrowed to the field of education. The sixth moment in the rhetoric of “profession” was the sloughing away of the terms “learned professions” and “liberal profes-

sions” in the early twentieth century, as “professions” began to refer to many vocations, just as it had in sixteenth-century English.¹

For Kimball the era of greatest ferment, of the most rapid changes in the rhetoric of “the profession,” was the nineteenth century. This was, of course, the era of dramatic growth of what Karl Polanyi termed a “new way of life,” centered around capitalism and individualism:

That system developed in leaps and bounds; it engulfed space and time. . . . By the time it reached its maximum extent, around 1914, every part of the globe, all its inhabitants and unborn generations, physical persons as well as huge fictitious bodies called corporations, were comprised in it. A new way of life spread over the planet with a claim to universality unparalleled since the age when Christianity started out on its career, only this time the movement was on a purely material level.²

And this is just the era in which was to be found, as Thomas L. Haskell has shown, a countermovement:

What Durkheim had in mind when he spoke of improving “professional ethics” was what Tawney meant [i.e., in *The Acquisitive Society*] when he spoke of transforming occupations into professions, namely, the establishment or reinforcement of a collegial mode of occupational control. . . . [W]herever applied it meant an intensification of collegial discipline and a struggle for autonomy against patrons, clients, and other forces outside occupational ranks.³

In one sense, then, the goal of the professions was to establish for themselves a set of spaces metaphorically outside of the Weberian iron cage, spaces within which the professional might escape the deforming forces of the market.

Professional Places

But from the point of view of the geographer, one very interesting feature of the way in which the professions made that attempt was the way in which they relied on the construction of sets of *nonmetaphorical* places. Indeed, this has been symptomatic of the strategy used by the professions, from the clergy in the early eighteenth century, through lawyers, professors, and now physicians. In each case the professional laid claim to a status metaphorically outside everyday self-interest by operating from within a set of places whose scope and scale the professions attempted at every turn to control. If the clergy had the church and the sanctuary, the attorney the law office and the courtroom, and the physician the hospital and clinic, the professor had the “ivory tower.” And like these other professional places, the ivory tower has been widely seen, from within and without, as isolated, cut off from the forces of the outside world.

If the maintenance of these professional places as places has relied on the view of them as symbolically isolated, as separate from the rest of the world, this isolation has been maintained in a number of ways. Some are as simple as the building of a wall or fence or the location of the institution in a physically remote place. But more important — and certainly more interesting — have been other means. As Kimball notes, for example, in early New England local parishioners were expected both to construct the minister's dwelling and to maintain stores of firewood; there the minister's dwelling, like the parish church, established the professional status of the minister just through these ritualized practices.

At the same time, the institutionalized location of judge and attorney in the courtroom is a means by which the professional status of both is maintained; only they can occupy those positions and be said to belong there. This sense of who belongs where is further cemented in courtroom, operating room, classroom, and church alike by the existence of defined places that the audience may occupy and from which they may see and hear, but not touch, those occupying the places of professionals.

In each of these cases those operating within their appropriate places become actors in a system for the collection and organization of knowledge. The judge and attorney speak from their own positions; the defendant, typically, only from the witness box. The surgeon collects information, but only through the appropriate channels. Noise from the gallery, talk radio, and the like are merely that, noise. And, of course, the professor, when lecturing or doing research, is very much a part of a system for the acquisition and distribution of knowledge.

At the same time, in each of these cases the place of the professional is one not simply wherein information is transmitted from professional to audience; rather, the professional engages in actions and in discourse that is fundamentally performative. The minister declares a couple married, and in declaring it makes it so; the judge declares a defendant not guilty, and makes it so. And the professor does not merely pass along information, but rather performs it, constructing the truth in the telling.

The Universal Professional

But if the professional becomes a professional only by virtue of actions carried out in the appropriate place, to be a professional, at least according to the model supported by nineteenth-century writers like Durkheim and Tawney, is in a sense to step beyond the constraints of those places. In other words, the professional is universally a professional.

This is the case for several reasons. Just to the extent that professionalism is associated with licensing, and licensing, in turn, with governments, the establishment of professions regulated by systems of credentials establishes the state as an open space, within which the professional has the right of free move-

ment and, at least in principle, the right to be treated *as* a professional within the boundaries of that state and in all others with which it has established the appropriate agreements.⁴

At the same time, the almost universal establishment, within those credentialing systems, of ethical standards for practitioners of professions suggests another form of universality within which the professional operates; the professional is never “off duty.”⁵ The behavior of the professional is always relevant to the question of whether he or she is truly a professional. Indeed, so important is this fact that if it has been formalized in the codes of ethics of groups that have been granted exclusive rights over certain forms of activities, as in the case of attorneys and physicians, more marginalized or aspiring professions have used their adherence to such codes as a means of demonstrating the validity of their claims to professional status. This is precisely what has happened recently in computer science⁶ and within geography, in the case of geographic information systems.⁷

This form of universality is shown in another way, in the means that professionals have used to market themselves. This is perhaps most starkly the case in academics, where the job application, traditionally a listing of relevant experience, and the résumé, focusing on experience and skills, have been replaced by the curriculum vitae. If the other documents assume that the applicant has picked and chosen among his or her experiences, the curriculum vitae is generally assumed to be a comprehensive statement of the professional’s life, at least since leaving secondary school. The life of the professional is imagined to have a trajectory, a path of development from education to entry into a professional position, and on up the ladder; gaps, exceptions, changes of heart, all need to be explained, as all seem to suggest the lack of just what the code of conduct implies, a collegial spirit and an unalloyed moral will.

And in fact, in those cases in which the professional violates the code of conduct, and does so in a way that is seen as seriously jeopardizing the status of the profession, he or she is cast out, exiled, paradoxically, into the larger community of particular and particularistic individuals. In many cases — of physicians, military officers, and members of the clergy — this involves a kind of inverse marking; the individual is marked by the larger community as special just to the extent that the identifying uniform can no longer be worn.

The Fragmented Individual and the Academic Realm

The preceding has been merely a sketch, an attempt in a very preliminary way to lay out some of the features of the geography of the professions. I make no claim that it is wholly accurate, and it is surely not comprehensive. Yet I would argue that in its lineaments it is a reasonably accurate portrayal of the place of the professional in contemporary American society. I would at the same time argue that over the last several decades each of the professions has in a

different way faced challenges to this model of professionalism. Further, those challenges can be seen as involving a dual recasting, of the nature of the places within which the professions operate and of the ways in which they have been able to represent themselves as universal, as placeless.

The examples of these changes are manifold. First television and now almost-instant, Internet-based transcripts have breached the walls of the courtroom where before the printed word and the artist's sketch were the primary means by which the workings of the legal profession were made clear. At the same time, the development of entertainment programs, such as those on Court TV, and of alternative, private judicial proceedings, using judges hired by the parties, has blurred the distinction between the judicial and the nonjudicial, the professional judge and attorney, and the TV actor.

Similarly, the joint introduction of government-funded health insurance, managed care, and computer-based, networked medical-record systems has transformed the doctor's office. What was once imagined as a refuge within which a professional and his (or occasionally her) patient could discuss matters of life and death has now become porous, as everything that is said becomes possible fodder for pharmaceutical companies, insurance companies, law-enforcement agencies, and mass marketers. And, indeed, it ought to come as no surprise that similar changes have been felt in the realm of the academic professional.

The Academic Realm

In the nineteenth century, it is said, the ideal of the institution of higher education was Mark Hopkins at one end of a log and a student at the other. Stark as is this image, it points to just the claim that I have been making about the professions. For, on the one hand, the professor and student are "right there," engaging in the sort of dialogical project that requires that those involved be together, in a place. And, on the other hand, just to the extent that this is a place without ornament, the sort of place within which Plato put Socrates and his friends, the activities that occur are represented as universal.

And, in fact, this second, universalistic feature of academic life has come to be associated with the idea that scholars operate in a realm of "pure thought." If the average person needs to work at it in order to transcend the vicissitudes of everyday life — the barking dog, the bill collector, the reactionary senator, and the common cold — the scholar works in a place that allows just that sort of thinking to go on, and to go on routinely.

This idea of the scholar has, in turn, and in rather complicated ways, been incorporated into common sense about academic practice. As is commonly known, since the sixteenth, and especially the eighteenth, century this way of thinking about scholarship as pure thought has come to be associated with an idea, most familiarly formulated in the romantic reaction to modernism, of the

author as someone who by the very fact of authorship attains a kind of aura.⁸ That notion of the author has come to be the groundwork for the principle of intellectual property known as the idea of moral right, a notion that is, of course, at the center of European intellectual property law and is incorporated into the laws of all members of the World Intellectual Property Organization.⁹

It is easy here to imagine that because the creations of the scholar are characterized in the law as *intellectual* property, they are conceived in the moral-right tradition strictly as intellectual. And, in fact, this way of thinking would seem to make sense, just because it is very much in accord with a pair of ideas, about scientific knowledge as being a product of reason and scientific practice as involving the attempt to achieve scientific discoveries, to discover the nature of the world. Here, reason is very often construed as instrumental in nature; to use reason in science is to move from previously known facts and principles to that which was always there but remained unrecognized. It is in this way that science has been seen, too, as a matter of discovery, of truths that have existed but have not been known. Here science is seen as a product of Cartesian, extensionless minds, minds that need be neither here nor there. The acts of scientific reasoning and discovery can be seen as fundamentally placeless. And the relationship between the place where scientific work is carried out and that work itself is only contingent.

As it happened, this view of the relationship between science and the places wherein it is carried out was reinforced by the development of the vernacular science that by the sixteenth century had increasingly augmented — and threatened — more theoretical forms of learning. Written in other languages — Spanish, English, Italian, Portuguese, French, and Dutch — this literature focused less on the theoretical than on the practical and created results in the forms, familiar to geographers, of atlases and other compendia.¹⁰ If this work did not share in the developing appeal to instrumental reason among theoretically minded scientists, by representing the world itself as a laboratory and the scientist as a peripatetic laborer using universally applicable tools, the more vernacular science did promote the view of the relationship between the scientist and particular places as a contingent one.

Of course, even in the early eighteenth century advocates of moral right were fighting a rearguard action, for by then alternatives to the moral-right approach to intellectual property were well established. One of these, the Lockean labor theory of property, has been a particularly visible element of Anglo-American thinking about the nature of intellectual property and of scientific practice. And central to this view is the belief that labor is a form of human activity that creates a set of property rights, where those rights are contingent and alienable. Here too, the work of the laborer is conceived of as only contingently related to the places in which it is created. Indeed, after Frederick W. Taylor and Frank B. Gilbreth,¹¹ one can conceive labor as the product of only *parts* of the laboring body, products purely of habit and not of consciously directed labor.

So if for Marx the modern laborer was special because he had no property, common sense has come to imagine that the scientist, as intellectual laborer, has no proper place. But, in fact, it is a mistake to see the moral-right approach to intellectual property as centrally focused on a person, the intellectual. On the contrary, the moral-right theory is romantic in intent; its roots extend back to Vico — to the critique of the then-new Cartesian sundering of the mind and the body and to later attacks on the sundering of the human and the natural worlds.¹² In fact, it sees a central feature of a work as its place within a community, so that a work created is a work that becomes part of one's identity.¹³ Indeed, it sees the creations of the artist or scholar as needing to be protected just because they are the products of a whole individual, who inhabits a community — and a place.

The Fragmented Professional

Now, I would like to suggest that over the last twenty years this way of thinking about the scholar and scientist, which in spite of prevailing common sense has been right at the heart of the way in which these universal professionals have thought about themselves, has been undercut in a number of ways. Although these changes have roots in a variety of political, economic, and social phenomena, I would like to limit my attention here to the relationship between the university as a place, and a place within places, and a series of technological changes. Perhaps the best place to start, oddly enough, is with Jeremy Bentham.¹⁴

If we recall the two predominant ways of conceptualizing property — the labor theory and the moral-right theory — we see that in both cases the focus of discourse about property rights is on legitimacy. And in both cases theorists, like G. W. F. Hegel and John Locke, have justified their favored conceptions by appealing to stories about places. In the case of Hegel these are stories about people operating within communities, creating their identities through their possessions. As Hegel put it, “The rationale of property is to be found not in the satisfaction of needs but in the supersession of the pure subjectivity of personality. In his property a person exists for the first time as reason.”¹⁵ And for Locke, “Thus labour, in the beginning, gave a right of property wherever anyone was pleased to employ it upon what was common.”¹⁶

Whatever their — very substantial — differences, proponents of the labor and moral-right theories share one thing in their discussions of private property. They treat property as something that has a “real” existence. It is tangible, people have visceral connections with it, it is out there in the world. For Locke, a worker invests labor in an object, and the object is suffused with that labor. It is as though, with Walter Benjamin, property has a kind of aura.¹⁷

But for Bentham, property has value “[o]n account of the pleasures of all

kinds which it enables a man to produce, and what comes to the same thing the pains of all kinds which it enables him to avert.”¹⁸ Although, granted,

the value of such an article is universally understood to rise or fall according to the length or shortness of the time which a man has in it: the certainty or uncertainty of its coming into possession: and the nearness or remoteness of the time at which, if at all, it is to come into possession.¹⁹

Now, the interesting thing is this, that even though he uses words like “nearness” and “remoteness,” words that might be seen as appealing to the object just as they do in Hegel and Locke, in the end property is valuable *only* to the extent that it makes a person happy. And that means that the relationship between a person and his or her property is always contingent, always subject to reinterpretation and renegotiation.

So the real news is that with Bentham, as with the more recent Benthamite theories of value implicit in neoclassical economics, the object has lost its aura. In Thomas C. Grey’s memorable phrase, we have seen “the disintegration of property.”²⁰ Property is no longer of value because it is an outward expression of character, nor because the creator has insinuated her or his labor into it. Rather, a piece of property has value because of the pleasure that its owners imagine that it can create, and the transfer of property is in the end a contractual matter, where a piece of property is valued in terms of another measure, most often today, of money.

The New Academic Professionals

And, in fact, this process of contractualization has undercut the possibility of seeing the university as a place within which a group of academic professionals can be said to belong. At the same time, this process has been a part of the creation of a new set of academic professionals and a new model of professionalization.

The emergence of these new professionals has not occurred overnight. Indeed, in an important sense we can see that emergence as accompanying the rise of what Derek J. de Solla Price called “big science,” beginning early in this century.²¹ Central to the growth of big science was, of course, a substantial increase in the use of outside funding for research. But perhaps more important was the formalization of this support in government organizations,²² and geographers have long been a part of this process.²³

Funding for science is increasingly derived from organizations that are bureaucratically organized. Such funding sources typically work very much within the contractual model, seeing their provision of funds as reasonably requiring a reciprocal provision of scientific output, where that output, in turn, is expected to give credit to the source of funding. This system is now so much a part of scientists’ daily lives that it hardly needs mentioning. But we should

associations was now supervised from the government. And so, albeit indirectly, the government began to have the authority to set the standards that a curriculum would need to meet in order to be acceptable.

If teaching and research were increasingly required because of their funding sources to operate in accordance with accepted standards for the use of money, those standards themselves were undergoing change. The creation of the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) (established 1973) and the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) (established 1984) helped institute those standards.

In each of these cases — of government funding of research and of teaching, and of the authority of accreditation associations and of standards boards — the issue is *not* one of growing external control of the university. Or rather, that is only part of the story. Central to the story is the way in which educational institutions came to have operating within them groups of people who have closer ties to those outside the university than to those within, groups of people who see themselves as professionals.

As universities have come increasingly to be connected with governments, funding agencies, and the like, institutional representatives from within universities have found themselves forced to operate in accordance with technical standards set from without. And not unreasonably, they have seen as a means

