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# We Are All Professionals Now: Or, How Did Grocery Workers Become Essential “Heroes”?



Ted Lee May 20, 2020 · 22 min read

The COVID-19 global pandemic has laid bare many of the strange and bizarre contradictions of contemporary capitalism. One of these paradoxes in particular is the label “essential worker.” As most forms of commerce, business, production, and exchange shut down to minimize the spread of the virulent coronavirus, certain sectors of society have been designated as essential to the skeleton crew keeping a quarantined society afloat. Incidentally, many of these “essential workers” turn out to be some of the worst paid and most precariously employed. However, rather than, say, bump up their pay and benefits as befitting of their essential status within society, capitalists have turned to calling them heroes. In some cases, these newly minted heroes are given “hero pay” — a paltry increase in hourly wages — that are

already being rescinded despite the fact that infection rates in the US continue to grow exponentially. Hence, these heroes will sacrifice their bodies and health on the front lines of civic society because that is what is expected of their jobs. And, don't worry, we'll applaud them and give them laudatory slogans and other self-empowerment tripe to compensate them for literally risking their lives.

How did it come to this? How did grocery and fast food workers — once a type of employment used to threaten and scare unruly children in school to behave — become essential and heroic? And why are they still paid in peasant wages? One clue may be a paper written by sociologist Harold Wilensky titled “The Professionalization of Everyone?” published in 1964. Wilensky considered the idea that eventually, every job would become a profession and every worker a professional. In the end, he concluded that the idea of the professionalization of everyone “is a bit of sociological romance” (156). However, he did mention, “It may also be true that the empirical, critical, rational spirit of science finds its way into an increasing number of occupations” that leads to “a happy integration of professional and civil culture” (157).

This may sound weird to readers today, but Wilensky's assertion was a bit of a hot take in the 1960s. What's so controversial about everyone being a professional, or at the very least, acting like one? It isn't uncommon for us to praise someone for their professional behavior, many of us have

been told by teachers in school how important it is to learn to behave professionally when we enter the workforce, and certainly at one point or another in our lives most of us have considered someone unprofessional. And when someone calls us unprofessional, we bristle at the very insult. To be considered unprofessional, well, that's an attack on our very character. We all instinctively understand this, and the fact that this statement — the idea of universal professionalism — isn't controversial to us today is a sign of its utter victory. That's because the world Wilensky lived and worked within was on the cusp of a fundamental, traumatic transformation, the consequences of which we now grapple with today.

Stop and think about the times you've been called unprofessional. Do you know why? And what job were you working in? If you're like me, perhaps one of the first times you were called unprofessional was while working a minimum wage job at a fast food joint. Someone called me unprofessional, which meant that I didn't cater to their every need, was slow in service, and apparently rude to boot. But if someone from the 1940s saw Karen calling me, a teenager still finishing high school working at a fast food joint, unprofessional, the very idea would be absurd. Of course I'm unprofessional. After all, I'm not a professional. Why on earth would I need to "act professional?"

Instead, my manager from 2000 sternly reprimanded me for my unprofessional behavior.

To understand the origins of professionalism, we need to understand capitalism. Like professionalism, everyone knows what capitalism means but find it difficult to define. Certainly, capitalism is about markets, profits, trade, corporations, the means of production maybe, but all of those things existed before capitalism. What made capitalism new and unique in Great Britain in the 1600s was the idea of *ownership* — specifically, who got to own the means of production. In the 1600s, this meant land. Later, it would mean factories. Even later, it would mean our very bodies. But let's not get too far ahead just yet.

Capitalists argued that whoever owned the means of production owned whatever the means of production produced even if they weren't the ones who produced it. Therefore, if someone grew potatoes on land, that someone didn't get to keep the potatoes if they don't own the land. On face value, this seems absolutely absurd. Why on earth shouldn't the person who put in the work and labor own the potatoes? But this is the kernel that regulates almost every single relationship in our current capitalist society. And in our potato scenario, if the landowner found out, they had legal claim on those potatoes and if the potato grower did not relinquish them, the landowner might call the cops who will violently take those potatoes away and give them to the landowner. This relationship extends to the factory — it doesn't matter if someone puts in the time and effort to build a chair within a chair factory; the owner of the chair factory

de facto owns the chair. In exchange for the labor, the owner pays the chair maker a wage as they see fit, and then choose to keep or sell the chair as they see fit. They keep it all. The chair maker has no real say outside of feeble negotiation power. Again, this seems inherently unfair and absurd, yet this is the fundamental axiom of our economy. Our entire society — laws, culture, infrastructure — are designed around this simple fact. And it is here, in the empty spaces within the framework of this basic economic relationship where we will introduce the early professional and why so many scholars are so fascinated and puzzled by them.

Let's consider the medical doctor, often considered the ideal and quintessential professional. What does the doctor produce? Well, the doctor doesn't produce any particular physical goods like potatoes or chairs. They do provide a kind of good — healing — that is essential to a healthy society, but it's not the kind of physical product one can create and trade on the market. And what is the means of production for a doctor? Certainly, there are tools and equipment that help the doctor do their job, but ultimately the means of production is their knowledge. It takes a great deal of work, time, effort, and intelligence to become a doctor, and they in turn will give you access to their embodied knowledge for a price. What they create is not a physical good but a service, and as such they embody the means of production, the labor, and the product within a single person.

Here is where the scholarship gets contested. Taclott Parsons

and Harold Wilensky saw professionals as an outgrowth or natural conclusion from the development of rationalism, capitalism, and science. Magali Larson sees professionalism as an economic strategy where workers in a field get together and decide to create a mini-monopoly by restricting who gets to work in it and building prestige around their knowledge and skills through scarcity. Hannes Siegrist saw professionalism as a new service class whose clients were primarily bourgeois and so the professionals imitated the bourgeois to gain their sympathy and patronage. Others saw professionals as evolving from medieval guilds, using scarcity to justify insulation from the constant shocks of the free market. But one thing was certain, professionals didn't exactly fit into the neat picture of capitalism as the owners of production (the bourgeois) or the laborers whose work is exploited for profit (the proletariat).

While there is no universal definition of what a profession is — Eliot Friedson called them “an intrinsically ambiguous, multifaceted folk concept” (32) — there are some agreed upon traits found among most of the original professions (generally considered medicine and law, sometimes military, teaching, clergy, and engineering). They include:

1. an esoteric body of knowledge that professionals claimed mastery over
2. some form of occupational enclosure (restricted access to being a member of the profession)

3. some formalized or institutionalized process that regulated membership within the profession (usually through credentials and education)
4. a camaraderie or collegiality among peers recognized as fellow professionals
5. autonomy as a worker (generally self-employed) and autonomy as a field to self-regulate itself
6. A service-oriented ethic, usually one that asserts the profession serves a higher societal good above mere commerce which often leads to the profession developing a sense of purpose beyond profit

Already, there's some characteristics about professionals that seem anti-capitalist. For one, there's the idea of occupational enclosure; the concept of a free and unregulated market is anathema to the idea of a monopoly or oligopoly, and professions were essentially that. Most professions allied with the newly formed and growing nation-states of the 1700s and 1800s, relying on the state to regulate their markets through legal systems that made it illegal to practice without some kind of license or degree. Hence, I cannot claim to be a medical doctor and practice without some kind of legal repercussion. In addition, the collective identity of professionals belonging to a single profession (and often creating powerful organizations and interest groups to protect and promote their agendas) also flies in the face of capitalist ideas of self-interest, enlightened greed, and individualism. And we'll see how capitalism reacts to the

growing power of professionals later in this story.

The last point, the service-oriented ethic, is also a striking contradiction to the concept of capitalism, and it is what I'm mostly interested in as a researcher because out of all the six points, this one is the most powerful and the most pervasive. There is an idea that professionals work for a higher calling than profit. Once again, let us examine the medical doctor. Certainly, medical doctors get paid quite a lot in the United States. After all, a large reason for professionalizing medicine was to create a limited supply of doctors who could then charge a larger amount of money for their services. But doctors also have a lot of cultural prestige because of the idea that doctors are not concerned about money as much as they are about their patients and health. Doctors take the Hippocratic Oath where they vow to do no harm. They have codes of ethics that maintain ideas such as patient confidentiality and avoiding conflict of interest when dealing with clients. There is a strong belief in society that a doctor who pursues only money — especially at the cost of health for the patient — is not just a bad doctor, but a *bad person*.

And it is this idea that doctors have higher moral standards for themselves that supposedly justifies their position in society. They enjoy these privileges, both economic and social, because they are essentially better people. They are more selfless than the average worker, less concerned with profit than the average worker, and thus more likely to work for the good of the patient rather than for themselves. This is



important because the process of becoming a professional, then, was not necessarily to become a skilled and competent *worker* but to become a *good person*. Or, more specifically, learning the skills and knowledge in a professional manner will help make you a good person.

As capitalism and labor markets grew more complex and workers became more aware of their exploited status, there were two options a workforce could essentially take in the 1800s-1900s: they could either unionize or professionalize. Unions and professions basically had the same goals — create regulations that would bring more profit to their work — but allied with different agendas. Unions veered towards a proletariat identity while professionals veered towards a bourgeois identity. You can see this in how they celebrate themselves and how they're perceived in society. Unions emphasize the trades and craftsmanship, solidarity amongst the working class regardless of occupation and organizing against the owners of the means of production. Professions emphasize their skill but through mastery of knowledge and education, their status as individual experts rather than a collective group, and internalizing bourgeois values of apolitical neutrality, a disdain for conflict, and Victorian ideas of discretion and comportment.

And if you happened to be a woman, non-white, or part of a large class of workers considered “unskilled” (which usually consisted of women/people of color), well, you were out of luck. If you got to participate in the workforce at all, it was

often in unregulated, brutal conditions with little recourse or opportunity to organize. Hold onto this thought, because this also comes into play at the end of our story.

The first half of the 20th century saw the height of both unions and professions. Either one was the key into more prosperity and middle class life, and more and more fields angled to become one or the other. Most fields attempting to professionalize never saw the “full” kind of professionalization as seen among doctors or lawyers and became what some sociologists called “semi-professions”; they had some of the hallmarks of professionalism but often lacked key components, usually self-regulation and occupational enclosure (there are only a few professions like medicine and law where a member could be banned for life in a way that was enforceable violently by the state).

The easiest of the components to achieve, however, was the service-oriented ethic, and it was generally this piece of the professional pie that workers went for first. All it required was some process of indoctrinating new members (usually through schooling/training) into believing that they served a higher purpose than simply making money (though certainly many members were also very interested in making money and joined the profession to do so). There were marketing reasons for this, of course; if people believed you put them first above yourself, then they’re more likely to do business with you. But there’s also psychological reasons — people want to know their work is useful and that they’re good

people. Many workers were willing to believe in this — nurses, welfare bureaucrats, primary education teachers, university professors, car salespeople, librarians, real estate agents — so all of them began to adopt the trappings of the original professions and particularly professional *behavior*.

And then neoliberalism happened. During the 1970s, a series of economic crises such as stagflation and recessions and oil price spikes disrupted the capitalist dream. With the ever-looming threat of communism, capitalists began to push for a more aggressive, even more distilled version of capitalism. If the post-Great Depression era was leaders like Franklin Delano Roosevelt saving capitalism from itself by making it softer and kinder (to an extent), then the new neoliberal capitalists saw the answer in pushing capitalism to its limits. Because of their belief in the invisible hand and virtuous self-interest, they sought to make everything in society governed by the free market. This often meant drastic deregulation and the elimination of any kind of government-run program or centralized structures and institutions. It meant subjecting everyone to the full whims of the market, with all of its booms and busts, believing that it would sort out the winners and the losers and that both of them would be deserving of their respective fates.

Perhaps one of the most pervasive (and perverse) effects of neoliberalism, however, is how it changed the very concept of the self. Because neoliberals worshipped capital, they also believed people should act like capital itself — fluid, easily

transformed, fungible, mobile, infinitely transmutable, and self-generating in profits. We should be *entrepreneurs*, not workers. Self-motivated, self-starting, willing to the point of throwing ourselves into the furnaces of Moloch and COVID-19 to go back to work, to find meaning in work — because for neoliberalism, to not work is to die, not just existentially but also metaphorically, emotionally, and mentally. To not work is to lose your very identity as a person. Before neoliberalism, there was no doubt to most people who a capitalist was — someone who owned the means of production. We all might labor in a capitalist system but most of us weren't capitalists; it was the class that owned the land and the factories and offices. But neoliberalism rooted the means of production in the individual. It (falsely) redefined the means of production as labor, and everyone could provide some kind of labor (except for children, the elderly, and the disabled, and that's why neoliberal capitalists *really* hate them), and because of that, everyone was redefined as a capitalist. It was all a slight of hand to get us to look away from the actual structural problems of capitalism and focus on the individual instead, but it sure did work.

Rosemary Crompton notes that neoliberals did not like professions at all. Rather than subjecting themselves to the market, the professions worked to insulate themselves from it. Rather than allowing the market determine the price of goods and services, they heavily regulated it. Rather than allowing anyone to participate in the hurly burly of capitalist trade, they restricted who could join in on their fun. And to

do all of this, they relied on the power of the state to protect their monopolistic endeavors. Something had to be done about the professionals.

(It should be noted that the same was thought about unions, but capitalists broke up unions much more aggressively and violently; to break the power-base of professionals, who were often wealthier and held more status and power, more subtle strategies were necessary.)

There were several things that happened to achieve this. Supply-side economics demanded a more flexible workforce. How this was achieved was through what Guy Standing called “the feminization of labor.” Because women were excluded from the formal workforce and often expected to maintain most domestic work which capitalism did not value, most women worked temporary jobs with flexible hours for low pay in deregulated markets. They often worked multiple types of jobs, leveraging their diverse skillsets to fill whatever niches were necessary at the time. Capitalism began to purposefully exploit that labor more and more by “de-skilling” certain types of work and then using the excuse that a once valued skilled work is now unskilled to hire women instead of men; as such, yes, more and more women entered the workforce but more men were now dropping out, and because women were valued less, employers could pay them a fraction of the previous wages while also keeping the expectations of working odd hours without any stability week to week or even day to day that unions had fought so hard for.

Standing was mostly referring to unskilled and semi-skilled work when discussing the feminization of labor, but we can see the feminization of labor at work in the way professions eventually opened up to women. Some professions such as librarians were always feminized and others such as archivists became feminized in the latter half of the twentieth century. For archivists, many saw a gradual drop in pay, access to resources, and prestige. Others, such as medicine, saw the creation of tiers — more women were nurses and physicians assistants/associates who were not paid as much as medical doctors who stayed predominantly men. As women and people of color entered the professions, those who paid the professionals used it as an excuse to denigrate professional work and thus professional pay; every professional woman and person of color can tell you multiple stories where people felt they weren't professional enough because they didn't act "middle-class white man" enough and suffered the subsequent economic consequences.

Cristina Morini especially saw the feminization of labor adopted among a new class of workers called "information workers" (sometimes also called cognitive capitalism). Information workers, rather than working with materials and goods or physical stuff in general, worked with information, with symbols, with ideas. The quintessential information worker for many is probably the computer programmer who writes in an esoteric language that makes your computer do some really cool and neat stuff. Morini argued that advances

in telecommunications and computing allowed information workers to bring their work home and it caused two major reorganizations in the way we think of work. One, it reorganized space; work was no longer confined to the office or factory but also available in the home. Two, it reorganized time; work was no longer confined to the shift, the clock, the office hours but now extended into every possible waking hour.

Morini compared this reorganization to women's work — most women's work involved sustaining life for others, usually occurring within the home, and a never-ending job; mothers, for example, were always on call. Morini argued that this reorientation turned the corporation and our work into a kind of living thing we had to constantly tend to, kind of like a Tamagotchi that constantly screamed at you from your phone for attention and care — except the Tamagotchi could fire you if you ignored it too much. For Morini, this not only changed the nature of work but the nature of the worker: “people bend towards an *adaptable/sacrificial /oblivious position* which is a cultural feature in the history of female experience” (47). In short, the reorientation / reorganization of information work feminized every information worker by making them into the mothers of their work.

On a different front, Isabell Lorey identifies what she calls precarization, governing a population through creating precarity. She notes that precarization is a clear departure

from the past. Living precariously, well, sucks. Everyone knows that. And earlier forms of capitalism argued that even if a certain portion of the workforce had to work in precarious conditions — that is, in working conditions that were unstable and detrimental to one’s wellbeing — it meant that more people than ever before in history could be protected from precarity due to the productive capacity of capitalism. Eventually, capitalism expanded who could be protected from precarity to middle class, unionized workers, and professionals, but there was always the unfortunate creation of a precarious laboring class (which capitalist optimists always foresaw as one day vanishing).

But neoliberalism, by leaning hard into capitalism’s roots, rebranded precarity as freedom. Similar to Morini’s idea of feminized information work, in order to pull precarization off you had to convince people that precarity was *self-empowering*. You had to make people want it. Or, as Lorey put it, “These kinds of biopolitical-governmental power and domination relationships are not easily perceived, because they frequently appear as sovereign, self-made, free decisions, or as personal insights, and even today they produce the desire to ask, ‘Who am I?’ or ‘How can I fulfil myself?’” (30). Do you ever think about how we often ask children the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” We don’t mean this in what kind of person you want to be, what kind of attributes you want, what you want your life to mean as a contribution to society or others. It means “what kind of job do you want when you grow up?”



Because in neoliberal capitalism, that's the entirety of what you will *be* in an existential, ontological sense of the word. You are your job, literally.

Thus, the gig economy isn't exploiting workers by giving them unstable, hard-to-predict-or-plan-for working hours; it's giving them the freedom to work whenever they wanted. Feminization of labor isn't exploiting pre-existing patriarchal ideas of the inferiority of women's work to get a more flexible and cheaper workforce; it is empowering women by giving them the option to work outside the usual nine to five shift so they can make more money in the off-hours of domestic labor. Feminized cognitive capitalism isn't turning you into an unwilling doting mother constantly nurturing your boss through emails, working on projects at the kitchen table while everyone else is asleep, checking Slack messages during dinner, and even answering to their every whim on the weekends; it gives your work *purpose* and *meaning*. Precarity, isn't something to insulate yourself from; it is a virtue to embrace. Precarity means freedom and empowerment.

Ok but we might be getting ahead of ourselves a bit. Let's pull back just a little.

As labor became more fluid and decentralized, it became more profitable and easier to exploit but also made it harder for employers to control. One of the things about taking your work home, for example, is that your boss can't peek over

your shoulder or yell at you when they catch you slacking off. The factory foreman can't ensure that you don't take too long of a bathroom break. If all of your workers are gig workers who you contact and communicate and issue orders to remotely and you don't even know their names or faces, it creates a distance that you have to cross in order to more directly control them. This was a real problem!

But then neoliberals figured something out. What does this new worker sound like? Someone who works autonomously and individually as opposed to in a collective or corporate group setting, someone who has to self-regulate themselves, who sees their economic value in their diverse set of skills rather than what they directly produce or own, and often wants a higher purpose in their work outside of just getting enough money to survive?

Oh.

They sound like professionals.

And professionals have a certain status in society. People look up to professionals. People want to be professionals. They have values (that happen to coincide with the needs of neoliberal capital) and behaviors (that happen to coincide with the needs of neoliberal capital) that make them appear upper-class, refined, well mannered, educated, smart, skilled, competent, you know, *professional*. And people like the idea of being considered professional. And already so many fields

now under attack by deregulation, by feminization of labor, by precarity, had been trying to professionalize and the only thing they had managed to create was a professional expectation and mindset without any of the economic benefits.

And suddenly, the professional, that oddball of capitalism, found the perfect slot to fit into in neoliberalism.

Never mind that in the 1940s the idea of secretaries, restaurant staff, security personnel or furniture retailers (to name a few as researcher Valérie Fournier did) would never have been considered “professionals,” that the very idea that they could ever be “professional” would seem laughable even to someone like Wilensky— we now expect them (and everyone else) to act professionally. That’s because “being professional” is a way of life, it is a way of being, a way of thinking and acting and seeing the world and yourself and your expectations in a particular way. Professionalism was a ready-made, already existing pool of ideas and beliefs and aspirations and emotions that employers could tap into to, as Fournier put it, “control the increasing margin of indeterminacy or flexibility in work” (281). It turns your work into your identity, and you into your work. Or, to put it more bluntly, you didn’t have to obsessively watch over your employees anymore if you could get your employees to do it for you by surveilling themselves (though this still didn’t stop employers from trying to obsessively surveil their employees anyway).

Professional values are very similar and closely interrelated to Fobazi Ettarh's concept of vocational awe, where work takes on a sacred quality and you are the hierophant. Vocation, another word that once had a specific meaning before becoming another word for "job" literally refers to the Latin word *vocare*, to call. It referred to being called by God to do a certain task or job, imbuing your work with a sense of sacredness or consecration. Similarly, professionalism elevates work to something higher, and many sociologists point out that professionals often took the role of secular clergy in modern, (supposedly) disenchanted, capitalist society. Both Ettarh and John Leary in his book, *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism*, point out that many capitalist buzzwords today carry religious connotations. Take, for example, the word "passion." We're supposed to be passionate for our work, but the word passion has roots in describing the suffering of Christ on the Cross; the passion of the Saints led them to martyrdom. So what does it mean when we're meant to be passionate about our job? Or, as Ettarh puts it:

*You can't eat on passion. You can't pay rent on passion. Passion, devotion, and awe are not sustainable sources of income. The story of Saint Lawrence may be a noble one, but martyrdom is not a long-lasting career.*

But ultimately, capitalism has so successfully convinced us that we need to act like professionals that there is a high

emotional charge when someone calls us unprofessional. Because we know what that actually means; they're insulting our sense of self, our very worth to the economy and society, our morality as a person. And so, we have all for the most part accepted the idea that we must all act like professionals even if we enjoy the complete opposites of the privileges professionals traditionally enjoyed. And, perhaps most chilling of all, most of us *want* to be a professional, desire to be professional, and judge those who are not, regardless of whether we're treated as such.

Of course, this is a double-edged sword. You expect professional behavior and those people expect to be treated as professionals in return. Some folks like ambulance drivers and paramedics, according to Leo McCann and others, fashion together a form of blue-collar professionalism that imbues their difficult jobs with a sense of meaning. They've also used it to try and fight for better pay and working conditions. Unfortunately, they've also largely failed for the time being. However, blue-collar professionalism does allow them to retain a sense of "moral dignity" and "take an implicit moral position by performing some of the least pleasant parts" of their work "which, while unheralded, are socially essential" (McCann et al, 767).

There it is again, that phrase: "socially essential." Paramedics, ambulance drivers, grocery store clerks, truck drivers, cleaning staff, cooks — all of these jobs are "socially essential" but aren't treated or paid as such. However, we do

expect them to act professionally, and what does “act professionally” mean as a shorthand?

(For many people of color, it means to act like a white person; for many women, it means to act like a man. But, for the purpose of this essay which has already gotten way too long, we’ll set this aside.)

It means to work for the greater good of society and put it over profit. In fact, many of us are so indoctrinated by this cult of professionalism that when any workers (not just “real” professionals like medical doctors) demand more money for their work, when they reduce their job to mere commercial transaction and money — how gauche! — we become upset. We become angry. How dare they! Don’t they understand there’s a bigger picture? Don’t they realize they are *professionals* and that they are *essential*? Don’t they realize there is a crisis and they are exploiting it? To do so is to be *greedy*, and there is a very real pearl clutching moral outrage in reaction to when people point out that these essential workers are dying and left to twist in the wind while providing their essential services. To be professional is to be self-sacrificing, and if there’s one thing capitalists and the bourgeois middle class love to do, it’s sacrificing others for themselves. The rest of us are taught to think this is just how the world is supposed to work. Or, worse yet, desire to sacrifice ourselves.

So we may grudgingly give them some meager “hero pay”

(and sometimes even ask for it back) — but not too much lest they get it in their heads that their labor is actually all about money and not about the good of society. And it is here we may see part of the answer to David Graeber’s question in his book *Bullshit Jobs: why do we pay the most worthless of our society the most and the most valuable members of our*

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society the least?

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Because we’re all professionals now. And professionals are not supposed to be in it for the money but for the love of the game. David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* (Simeon and Schuster, 2018).

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Except we didn’t make the rules for the game.

The capitalists did.

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