

Power: Interpersonal, Organizational, and Global Dimensions

Monday, 28 November 2005

TOPIC: Professional authority and cultural hegemony

We've explored transformations in authority as a form of power in the modern/contemporary world. We've seen how power has shifted from inherited positions to be located in professions.

Chart [from packet]: **historical shifts in forms of authority**

- Weber: traditional/charismatic authority to legal/rational/expert/democratic
- small capitalists to managers/bureaucrats
- Simmel: subordination to a person or to a group then ultimately to a principle (law)
- Michels: direct control and simple supervision to hierarchal and indirect controls through a bureaucratic system
- Nisbet: from community (plural sources of authority) to individual (atomistic market /concentrated market/bureaucratic)

Where does the most **individual freedom** lie in these organizational/institutional structures? Why is individual freedom the measure of social order? What is individual freedom a measure of?

This provokes us to **question the taken for granted assumptions concerning common place evaluations** of what is better or worse in systems of power. We've been arguing that, in the modern world, **power is institutionalized in professions** – the rise of the professional, expert, competent authority. There is a “disenchantment of the world,” a “chasing away of magic” as Weber said. Why do we assume that professional authority is less autocratic/authoritarian, more free, than historic systems of power derived from religion, community, family, monarchy etc.?

James Fallows and Gary Peller present very different views of professional authority. They both offer powerful critiques of professional authority, questioning the criteria for evaluating power/authority.

I. First example, reading.

“The Case Against Credentialism” (1985) by **James Fallows**, at the time editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, which started publishing in the early 19th century with a general circulation with articles of considerable length for an intelligent reading public.

Article illustrates the create of a taken for granted ideology, so pervasive in American society, as to be considered hegemonic. We will discuss the meaning of this term as we move along.

Fallows' article begins with a hypothesis proposed by Harvard psychologist David McClelland.

- In 1961, McClelland conducted a study of different kinds of societies, social groupings he called – **achieving societies/subgroups/cultures** that seemed to share a particular set of values. Instead of believing that the struggles for a better human life were fruitless or dependent on destiny/fate/god, these cultures conveyed to their children the idea that **the individual could control/influence his/her fortune** (the shift from the *ascribed* to the *achieving* society!). These cultures, however, conveyed an exaggerated view of individual potential/influence – they are **man-centered** rather than god/destiny-centered cultures.

- McClellan suggested that in these achieving cultures, people were regularly taught to take risks, be adventuresome, regularly underestimate odds against them. Folklore conveyed these myths, encouraging people to have ambition to make their mark on the world. *Do we have the same kind of stories being taught? Discussion.*

Fallows describes his worries about this model of the achieving society, yet we might notice that the myth of Horatio Alger (a character in books at end of 19th century – “**rags to riches**”), the myth that anyone can succeed with hard work, is still strong in the US. And, attention to the "rich and famous" like the Horatio Alger stories suggests to the public that the story is empirically sound: half of the richest people have made their money in their own lifetimes. Thus in a statistically mistaken conclusion, population might believe that there is a good probability of rising into this class of billionaires. (Ecological fallacy.) There is attention to and celebration of entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, Fallows argues that there is growing evidence that the entrepreneur achieving spirit is waning. (note, written in 1985, before the internet boom.)

Fallows' article describes a war between **two different cultures of achievement** that have different implications for our future.

What Fallows provides is **critique of professionalism**, of expert authority. His topic is the rise of professionalism in business (not family or science as we have discussed).

- He discusses the **entrepreneurial form of achievement** – informal, outside normal chances, involves risk-taking, adventure, imagination.
- The other achievement culture is in **values/orientation of professional work** – it conveys status, prestige, dignity, and security. This culture rests on the notion that excellence in school means excellence in life; life is a meritocracy and merit will win out. (Merit measured by success in school, as schools currently constituted.)

On p. 50, Fallows offers a description of the two different cultures of achievement. In one, a Houston housewife labored in obscure solitude on her first novel, picked agent's name out of magazine, and sold her story for \$350,000 – this is more out of *entrepreneurial* culture. If she uses the money to send her son to private boarding schools, the son will be a citizen of *meritocratic* culture.

These two are in tension in American business. We see the increasing number of MBAs as evidence of the **movement from an entrepreneurial ethic to a professional culture**. Fallows wants to know why professions are attractive and businesses/services are unappealing. What do professions actually add to the economy, what is the added value?

Fallows is worried about the number of people in consulting and investment banking while manufacturing is less attractive. Yet, it is in manufacturing where there is a *real* production of goods. Investment just moves money around without making goods, he claims.

He suggests that three changes produced this current situation:

- conversion of jobs to professions**
- scientific measurement of intelligence**
- use of government power to channel people to certain occupations**

The dislocations in late 19th and early 20th centuries challenged traditional forms of security by creating national markets and uncertainty (p. 52). (Workers sought security through

unionization, grew and then declined after 1950s.) The middle ranks of workers [rather than lowest or highest] were dislocated/made insecure by this transition to national markets. Shopkeepers/craftspeople took the most promising routes to security by **creating licensing and regulation** (plumbers, electricians, beauticians) – middle level workers tried to **secure monopoly** over parts of the market by getting a license. A license usually requires school, or perhaps apprenticeship. It prevents other people from claiming this occupation – they were **limiting access!** This middle level of workers were made insecure by nationalized mass markets, and they sought to secure their place in it through these licensing and regulatory activities. They created monopoly through systematic skill, access to training, control of market competition, raising of professional standards for members. Thus, they managed to secure a niche outside of more competitive, insecure marketplace. There is always a **claim of special expertise** as these new professions get made. The license provided a means of **transmitting knowledge on which their authority was based**, reserving control for themselves. So they kept raising educational standards. These middle professions copied traditional templates of medicine/law/business, requiring more specified training/ education to enter these professions.

cultural change #1 – **distinct professions require academic training**

- **degree/license = substitute for any observed performance**
- once you have that license, it's hard to get rid of that license
- **Fallow's point:** once you have the license, you are **not assessed for performance, you are assumed to have the merit/skill**
- rise of professions with protected occupational niches

cultural change #2 – **creation of scientific measurement of intelligence**

- Binet created test for French public schools (~1900) to see which children could *not* do well in standardized/routinized French system of education. It was comprised of a series of questions that would test performance – when he got a test in which the children's performance equaled the teacher's subjective assessment of the children, Binet figured he had normalized the test, made it a valid measure of school performance. He was trying to figure out whether he could find an instrument that would produce a result consistent with the teacher's assessment.
- This became, not simply an assessment of the teacher's skill with different kinds of students but instead, a **measure of a fixed, innate, born intelligence** of the child – this is how it is frequently understood. Instead of being a test of teaching it became a measure of some physical capacity used to **distinguish social classes, ability levels**.
- There are arguments about its unfairness, but there is always a desire to find an objective way to measure individual merit or ability so that jobs/rewards/places could be apportioned in rational objective fashion according to merit. Intelligence testers sought (and continue to see) this objective standard (e.g. GRE, LSAT) – it claims to provide a reliable way of linking intelligence, mental capacity, and occupation. (Note: assumption that differential capacity/ performance/merit deserving of differential reward; assumption that capacity is individual characteristic, not socially structured when in fact it is mix of class and individual. Data reveal that performance on tests is correlated with income TO A POINT and then levels, suggesting that a certain amount of income necessary for mean performance on text, more income will not secure higher scores...)

(This testing of intelligence has become an industry! But tests like the SAT or GRE, for example, are *not* correlated with achievement in life, but are simply correlated with achievement in first year of college.)

Brief summary: The first cultural change was the development of professions and consequent implication of higher education. The second change implied that only a few people would be recognized as having the raw material to handle the long years of schooling. Prior to the sorting mechanism, there was more restricted access to the education that would ensure professionalism.

cultural change #3 – **further refinement in educational tracking system**

- There was collusion of the government in this process (some for academic careers, some for manual labor) but also deferment for the military based on test results. From 1940-1970, through three wars, the US deferred military service or tracked into non-combat units those with higher education. The selective service deferred men on the basis of IQ and college status. We created **class-based system** in the military.
- When the draft was eliminated in 1970, we got a voluntary military that is staffed predominantly by those of lower socioeconomic status. The military is the only organization in US that appears to be almost totally meritocratic. You enter and follow explicit rules – there are no hidden agendas as the military *trains people to an articulated standard, provides clear definition of excellence and routes/means to achieve it*. The military showcases the highest rate of achievement across socioeconomic and racial categories because of the **transparency of rules and standards**.
- Not only did the military use IQ tests and college education as way of sorting young men, but the government advertised and encouraged people to get an education to get certain jobs. By the 1970s, the US was a place where certain kinds of distinctions were disreputable (wealth, color) but **intelligence remained a legitimate distinction**, acceptable as a basis of advantage (wealth, status, and power).

By the third change, the state had become an agent in steering men into stations of life. This supported the **notion of meritocracy – that people rise to the top based on ability**. The problem with meritocracy is that people become resigned to their fate (like non-achieving societies) and this resignation to one's subordinate position can be exacerbated by the biological argument that IQ is genetic. So, it follows, if talent is inherited and genetic endowments give us the capacity to learn – why fight the inevitable? Thus, people become resigned.

This **hierarchy** has been created and sustained by the air of **scientific inevitability**. The idea of a **meritocracy depresses the unmeritorious** and prevents those at the bottom from trying and convinces them that they are unworthy.

The idea of meritocracy depresses, undervalues, and **destroys human capital** but also corrupts professionals, “making them more about keeping what they have than creating something new” (p. 64). It's not meritocracy but *mediocrity*. Credentials become too restrictive.

(During the 1970s/80s, there was a growing desire to administer IQ tests early, even to 6 month old children. Despite its likely long term dysfunctions, it is scientifically unsound because you corrupt the sample by continually testing children.)

We have become **simultaneously restrictive** with entry into the higher echelons **and lax** at the upper end (e.g. everyone admitted to college graduates). There is little relationship between education and skills required on the job (e.g. being good lawyer/good psychiatrist requires the skills of a friend or negotiator rather than those learned in technical information focus of professional education).

The notion of professional meritocracy functions as an **explanatory myth** – it shapes the attitude/values and the ways of understanding our position in society. (Hegemony has been used to describe explanatory myths – ways of thinking that go unchallenged.)

MBA's may have status anxiety because they don't have the license that lawyers do. Lawyers are moving into business. Academics supposedly trade money for freedom, low pay for high status. Fallows argues professionals give out **credentials without substance**, fall victim to the desire to achieve **status without objective performance**. The irony: many of the professional degrees do not train you for the skills in that field.

In urban societies, we are engaged in anonymous relationships without any ability of assessment or reliance on reputation. Example of reaction to this: In the last four years, there has been a push to publish the results of certain medical procedures for certain hospitals in order to foster this transparency of performance/information.