Professional Sheep

Review of *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-battering System that Shapes Their Lives* (Lanham, MD, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), pp. 280, ISBN 0-8476-9364-3

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Published in Frontline Volume 19 – Issue 7, March 30 – April 12, 2002

In his classic *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review Press, 1974) Harry Braverman observed that the system of monopoly capitalism had brought into being a sizeable "new middle class". Unlike the middle class of the earlier era which "possessed the attributes of neither capitalist nor worker", the new middle class "occupies its intermediate position not because it is *outside* the process of increasing capital, but because, as part of this process, it takes its characteristics from *both sides*. Not only does it receive its petty share in the prerogatives and rewards of capital, but it also bears the mark of the proletarian condition."

The professionals that are the subject of Jeff Schmidt's *Disciplined Minds*, appropriately and explicitly subtitled *A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-battering System that Shapes Their Lives*, are for the most part the same as the category discussed by Braverman. Schmidt has taken up and succeeded admirably in an ambitious task: that of explaining and exposing the politics of the modern workplace, which involves a high degree of "professionalisation," and the process of indoctrination of professionals, as well as outlining ways of resisting the process. Schmidt, a physicist by training, used to be a staff editor at a standard "professional journal", *Physics Today* for 19 years. For writing this book, the journal gave what may be the best compliment an author of a book such as this could be given – it fired him. (For details about the firing and the many protests the action has drawn, see the website: http://disciplined-minds.com). Schmidt's background and long experience are clearly apparent and result in remarkable insights. Often he puts his finger right on the spot, leading to a sense of 'I had the same feeling but had never articulated it this way'. Historian Howard Zinn's praise is apt: "I have been waiting a long time for someone to write this book, and Jeff Schmidt has done it."

The first part of the book argues that professionals who do the bulk of the creative work are "politically subordinate clones" who form a "trusted cadre" that boost the power of corporations and other hierarchical organizations. Schmidt observes that though professionals may be more liberal than non-professionals on a range of personal issues, they are more conservative on two key issues: democracy (i.e., professionals are less supportive of greater democratic distribution of power) and attitudes in the workplace. The latter is particularly important to employers since many jobs in fields as varied as journalism to education to commercial art, the employee's view of the world affects "not

only the quantity and quality" of the product, but "also the very nature of the product." Thus, a prerequisite for such jobs is the willingness and ability to exercise what Schmidt terms "ideological discipline."

All this may seem okay in the abstract or even when applied to the case of professionals who work under a boss for a salary. But Schmidt goes one step further and examines what may be the hardest case – scientists in universities – and observes how their work is strongly influenced by external forces. In a wonderfully evocative phrase, he terms the source of their motivation "assignable curiosity".

It is no secret that the vast majority of research in universities is funded by government sources. Through such funding, Schmidt points out, the government, "for all practical purposes, will have ordered" that university scientists perform that amount of research, say, in nuclear physics or molecular biology. "Though this is not the kind of order that names specific researchers, it is an order that individual university professors do end up carrying out."

What makes the effect of this directing of research and, more important, the purposes it serves, less apparent is the elaborate concealment game that goes on. Schmidt cites the case of a research project, funded by the US Air Force, at the University of California, Irvine (where Schmidt got his Ph.D.) headed by two solid state physicists. In their application, the two physicists described the objectives of their work as follows:
"The objective of the proposed program of theoretical research is an increased understanding of the interactions of electromagnetic radiation, particularly in the infrared, with matter. To be studied are the consequences of the inelastic scattering of electrons from ionized impurities in a doped semiconductor on infrared absorption in the Drude tail…" (and so on).

This description makes little sense to the non-initiated. Neither does it suggest why the US Air Force should be funding it. To get at least some clues, one has to read the Air Force's description of the same project:
"The infrared optical properties of these materials are important to the development of infrared detectors and coherent sources, integrated optics and electro-optical techniques, and high energy infrared laser windows and mirrors as well as interactions of materials subjected to laser beams."

Much of the terminology, when seen in the context of who is funding it, clearly points in the direction of weapons use. Indeed, in their description of an earlier project by the same scientists, the Air Force also reveals why it funds such theoretical research: "Rather than trial-and-error testing of a wide variety of materials this research seeks a fundamental understanding of the quantum interactions in and on crystalline solids."

Thus, the Air Force or other government agencies fund what may seem as theoretical, abstract, "blue sky" research because it has the potential to be used for developing weapons. Most professional scientists seem unaware of this connection, or choose to turn a blind eye to it. As to how they end up that way, one has to turn to the second part of the

book, its “field work” component. In this section, Schmidt describes the “intellectual boot camp known as graduate or professional school, with its cold-blooded expulsions and creeping indoctrination, systematically grinds down the student’s spirit and ultimately produces obedient thinkers – highly educated employees who do their assigned work without questioning its goals.” This discussion of graduate school is the most detailed section of the book. Methodically going through each step of the process – obtaining admission; courses and assignments; qualifying examinations; research under a supervisor; and finally getting employment – Schmidt reveals their role in “narrowing the political spectrum”, establishing “primacy of attitude” and producing “subordinate” professionals.

Schmidt adopts an engaging writing style, full of anecdotes. Many of them gave me a sense of *déjà vu*. For example, there was this classmate of mine in the Ph.D. programme. Let us call him F. Student F was clearly bright, passing his written qualifying exam at the end of his very first semester and doing well in most of his courses. Unfortunately, one of the senior professors in the research group F wanted to work in took a dislike to him. The reason: F prominently expressed his political convictions by wearing a Lenin button. Consequently the professor made sure that F flunked his oral qualifying exam. Though students were given a second chance within six months, the professor told all the other faculty members in the group not to accept him as a student. Seeing the writing on the wall, F had no choice but to seek his Ph.D. elsewhere. It is testimony to F’s calibre that he completed his Ph.D. from this new university at the same time as or before others in our class and going on to a productive career. My purpose in recalling this story is not just to buttress Schmidt’s arguments, but also to point out how many of our own experiences are reflected in this book, which then provides us a framework to make sense of these experiences not as individual aberrations but as a systematic pattern.

All is not gloom and doom. In the final part of the book, Schmidt offers some tips for resisting the process of indoctrination he describes. The first step, of course, has come earlier through the process of exposing how the system works. “Simple awareness of how indoctrination systems work is a big step toward undermining their effectiveness.” Then Schmidt draws on a highly unexpected source, “Field Manual No. 21-78” – the United States Army’s instructions to soldiers for resisting brainwashing and exploitation as prisoners of war. There are interesting insights to be found here since in “graduate school, as in the POW camp, the toughest struggle is not over whether you will survive the process, but over what sort of person you will be when you get out.” These instructions suggest ways of “working with others” through organising (which is “almost magically empowering”) and resisting subordination.

A book like this cannot be without its faults. Though the anecdotal style of writing makes for easy reading, it also leaves one feeling uneasy because it seems to over-generalise. One can think of counter-anecdotes, which then leaves one with the hard task of weighing the different kinds of evidence. In part, this problem results because Schmidt has not situated his work adequately within the larger literature on the role of professionals in modern society, which extends back several decades. I realise that doing so might have made the book too academic resulting in the loss of potential readers, but

there are (there should?) be ways of incorporating older insights in ways that do not scare away interested people.

There is also the problem commonly encountered in class analysis – the difficulty in coming up with a precise definition. At one point we are told a professional is more than one possessing “technical knowledge and skill” but “is a product of the schools” with “paper credentials”. Elsewhere, professionals “sell to their employers more than their labour power, the ability to carry out instructions. They also sell their ideological labour power, their ability to extend those instructions to new situations. It is this sale that distinguishes them from nonprofessionals.” And so on. To be sure, these descriptions overlap, but there also seem to be situations where it is hard to determine if an individual is a professional or a non-professional.

These minor faults aside, *Disciplined Minds* is an important book, to be read carefully and its insights applied to the world around oneself. Though primarily a work of sociology, it will be of immense use to those interested in a variety of fields: labor studies, education, science and technology studies and political science. While it may not gladden the hearts of all readers, it would certainly illuminate, and hopefully radicalize some. With that hope, I strongly recommend it.

Oh, and another thing. The book has great cartoons.