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# **A theory of collegiality and its relevance for understanding professions and knowledge intensive organizations**

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## **Introduction**

Complex tasks that cannot be routinized define professional and knowledge intensive work. When such tasks are carried out by collective actors (such as professional committees or workgroups), cooperation and mutual adjustments by these actors are not accounted for by models such as Weberian bureaucracy. Instead of weakening the concept of bureaucracy – as did the sociology of organizations during the past century – I would like to argue that two conflicting trends currently take place in societies where the knowledge economy accounts for an increasing part of production and growth. The first trend is simply the continuation of Weberian rationalization through bureaucratisation. The second trend is another kind of rationalization through collegiality and its particularistic social processes. I assume that understanding this second trend provides insights into modern professions since their practice seems to become more collective and organizational – with the further loss of independence that comes attached. Competition between the two trends characterizes an increasingly large area of production, as it becomes knowledge-intensive.

The purpose of this paper is not to describe the relationship between the two trends<sup>2</sup>. It is to identify the organizational form that helps in understanding collective action in situations of high task-related uncertainties that are dealt with by professionals and experts who tend to think of themselves as peers as they come to practice less individually and –increasingly– in teams. In this presentation, I outline a sociological view of collective action among peers by identifying collegiality as this alternative organizational form. This approach creates a theoretical continuum between bureaucracy and collegiality, a continuum on which empirical organizations can be placed. It shifts the focus of research towards the kinds of articulations or “compounds” of bureaucracy and collegiality are more frequent in knowledge-intensive societies, with all the social problems that come attached.

Collegial organizations have the reputation of being adhocracies and collectives where the real decision always seems to be taken somewhere else. Neo-Weberian theories (see especially Waters 1989) have proposed a more systematic view and a set of formal characteristics that differentiate collegial organizations from bureaucratic or monocratic ones. Here I argue that these theories are not sufficient by themselves to explain collective action among peers. A combined neo-Weberian and broadly conceived structural approach is

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<sup>2</sup> For developments about this issue, see Lazega and Mounier (2002) or Lazega (2004).

needed, one that looks at the individual, relational and organizational levels at the same time. Such an approach assumes that individuals have a strategic rationality. It looks at members as niche seeking entrepreneurs selecting exchange partners, carving out a place for themselves in the group and getting involved in various forms of status competition. From this conception of actors, it derives the existence of generic social mechanisms that are needed to sustain this form of collective action, in particular that of generalized exchange, lateral control, and negotiation of precarious values. It is rooted, first, in the analysis of the production process and task-related resource dependencies; and, secondly, in the analysis of derived governance mechanisms. The latter are theoretically derived from the notion of relational investment. Looking at such mechanisms helps in understanding how a collegial organization provides structural solutions to problems of collective action among peers: how it cultivates and mitigates status competition; how it maintains performance, quality, and controls; and, finally, how it maintains a form of status differentiation that helps with organizational integration and with the negotiation of precarious professional values or definition of professionalism<sup>3</sup>.

This approach, in my view, is useful to understand professions and knowledge-intensive organizations more generally. Collective action among peers—that is, cooperation among individuals who are, or tend to be, formally equal in power—is an important problem in social and economic life. For example, an increasingly large number of organizations find themselves involved in knowledge-intensive production. This means that they must permanently try to adjust to legal, technological and societal changes, to encourage higher quality, innovation, and participation. These changes and adaptations are often associated with an apparent decline of Taylorian rationalization of work. In this old model, competence, and regulatory and decision-making authority are concentrated at the top; objectivation and routinization of tasks are for the bottom. As a consequence of this decline, organizations involved in knowledge-intensive work try to reduce the number of hierarchical levels in their formal structures. They try to involve many more members and stakeholders in regulatory activity. In turn, organization theorists—after a century of critique of Weberian bureaucracy as a basic principle—focus on such contemporary flattening and decentralizing organizations.

In spite of this attention, collective action among peers remained a puzzle for the social sciences. Contemporary sociology does have a tradition of thought about egalitarian relationships in organizations and society. This tradition debates the possibility of organization without hierarchy. In particular, since Robert Michels's *Political Parties* (1911), many sociologists have pointed to the fact that flat organizations are also highly structured, a theme underlying discussions of the 'iron law of oligarchy' (for a review, see Rothschild and Whitt 1986). However, there is little empirically grounded work researching how organizations without permanent bosses and followers, in which all members ultimately have a formally equal say in running operations or exercising control, are able to operate.

### **The example of partnerships as an institutional form**

Professional settings have been of particular interest to the study of this form of collective action. These include corporate law firms, engineering and technology firms, architecture firms, advertising agencies, medical wards, consulting firms, investment banks, scientific laboratories, religious congregations, and many other organizations bringing together recognized experts. Professional partnerships are good examples to begin with. True partnerships are special types of collective (or 'corporate') actors. Historically, they go back to the earliest times. Their distinctive feature is the sharing of profits and losses in a common

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<sup>3</sup> See Lazega (2001) for empirical and methodological illustrations in a study of a Northeastern U.S. corporate law firm.

business undertaking, and they are held to be a complex entity (Rowley and Rowley 1960). From a collective action perspective, a partnership is an institutional form based on a nexus of contracts between members (practitioners and apprentices; partners and associates). As a legal form, it often assumes formal equality among partners, as well as individual and collective liability. In such collegial organizations, pressure towards consensus is strong. They bring together voluntarily members who want to satisfy their economic, social, and cultural common aspirations through an enterprise that is collectively owned and in which power is exercised as democratically as possible. It is thus a type of organization in which economic and social life are intertwined in a particularly visible way.

This contractual and voluntary basis is crystallized in a partnership agreement, a document in which partners put in writing the terms by which they govern their business affairs and organization. It provides rules for the conduct of the firm and guidelines for individual behaviour. It seeks to promote efficiency in many ways, and is therefore a powerful organizational device. These general principles are then more or less applied to specific firm situations. Partnership agreements apply to the various aspects of a firm's life, the prevailing firm philosophy regarding its practice, and how it should be undertaken. In doing so, they represent an attempt to bring an element of predictability to firm often very uncertain operations and to minimize the room for disputes regarding issues such as the work process, firm management, compensation decisions, and withdrawal terms (for the case of law partnerships, see Eickemeyer 1988). The agreement accomplishes this by setting ground rules as to each partner's rights and responsibilities in connection with these issues, and for the operation of the firm itself. In many ways, it is fundamental, because such rules and procedures help members constrain each other and reach consensus without resorting to coercion. Usually, the agreement also tries to enhance the image of the partnership as a closed professional community in which all partners have rights to participate, especially when they may not sell or transfer their partnership interest.

Agreements are usually comprehensive and difficult to modify. In traditional law firms, for example, three main issues (and consequently sources of controversy) are of particular interest to members: firm governance, compensation determination, and conflict management, including sanctions against members who do not abide by the rules. First, the agreement usually imposes a regulatory structure in which the partnership, the 'committee of the whole', is the ultimate authority. It establishes the committees that govern the partnership and a structure to run it on a day-to-day basis, thus delegating limited authority with more or less specificity. The partners establish policy and manage the affairs of the partnership through the partnership meeting. The meeting can, for example, vest an executive committee or a managing partner with the responsibility and authority for overseeing the firm's day-to-day operations. Secondly, a compensation committee is usually in charge of establishing each year a schedule for the distribution of cash and additions or adjustments to individual partners' capital accounts. This committee has to adhere to the agreed-upon principles in establishing partners' shares. An agreement can provide a formula or any other method by which each partner's compensation is determined, and, in setting out this method, it makes clear what weight the firm places on various factors (for example, seniority and loyalty to the firm, finding new clients, billed hours, apprentice training, and community activities that enhance the firm's prestige). Thirdly, conflict resolution mechanisms, including arbitration and mediation, are defined to handle partners' disputes. Formal procedures are used against members who violate the rules, but often as a last resort, especially since monitoring and sanctioning are undertaken not by external authorities but by the participants themselves. In such a case, infractors are likely to be allocated graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offence) by other members, by officials accountable to these members, or by both. If an individual breaks the rules more systematically, sanctions can

escalate until members punish the offender (and sometimes themselves) by breaking previous agreements.

Beyond the embodiment of a firm's approach to governance, compensation, and conflict resolution—which are the thorniest issues in most partnerships—the scope of such agreements is much wider. They also regulate admission to the partnership and attempt to anticipate, and provide for, inevitable events such as partner retirement, disability, withdrawal, and death, as well as issues such as the dissolution of the partnership. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of a partnership is the fact that exit is mutually controlled. Even where it results from death, the other partners are usually able to control the repayment of capital to a partner's estate or may have treated this as an insurable event. Even a partner who resigns cannot take his capital out precipitately but must reach an accommodation with the others. Production and collective action among partners are thus formally structured. In theory, firm's members know about such arrangements and order their professional lives accordingly. If the constraint of rules disappears, so does the collective interest and the capacity to work productively together. This legal contract is a set of constraints to which partners voluntarily subscribe. The rules formulated to produce quality work and to monitor this production are jointly defined.

However, in reality formal partnership agreements are limited: alone, they cannot structure collective action. They cannot function without the commitment of the members of the firm. Commitment to this contract requires more than a purely utilitarian, short-sighted and individualistic explanation. In effect, collective action rests upon the existence of a collective interest, which includes an individual interest in collective action. In itself, this collective interest is not sufficient to create collective action; it needs to be defended by members who are willing to enforce these rules in concrete situations. Sociological theory has traditionally argued that, in order to make contracts meaningful and enforceable, members have to use constraints by managing their interdependencies and internalize informal social norms. As Durkheim once pointed out, economic contracts are fragile and always destabilized by competition (see also Blau 1964; Macaulay 1963). One indication is that such organizations often seem to resist strong pressures towards incorporation brought about by market pressures and liability issues. Thus, we are entitled to assume that partnerships are characterized by economic but also social features –summarized here by the the notion of *social discipline* (Lazega 2003)– ensuring the maintenance and development of collective action.

The type of collective action specific to partnerships helps members work together and stick to their commitments. Economic cooperation and returns, while serving individual interest, are not entirely motivated by it. Social processes of exchange, recognition, control, and socialization are also involved. What exists is thus a collective interest that is supported by a collegial discipline constructed by these members. As stressed by Reynaud (1989), economic calculation, which is the basis of commitment, incorporates a 'project', a reflection that motivates members, or at least a large majority, to cooperate, even if they have to reduce their benefits or anticipate an uncertain future gain to give up certain present gains. Malcolm Waters's approach to collegial organizations takes up such a view; it is a renewed synthetic contribution—in the tradition of Weber and Parsons—to the description of collective action among peers.

### **The collegial form of organization and its social discipline**

In order to understand cooperation among peers as an issue of interest to organizations in general, saying that activities are governed by objectives and results –no longer by

Taylorian standard procedures and pyramids— is not enough. A first step consists in defining the characteristics of an idealtypical collegial organization, as distinguished from bureaucracy. A second, theory-guided step consists in identifying and analysing generic social processes that characterize this organizational form and help it govern itself.

The first step, at the intersection of the sociological literatures on organizations and on the professions, is represented by neo-Weberian theories of the general principle of 'collegiality'. Waters's papers (1989, 1993) on the collegial or 'polycratic' model, for example, offers a fresh look at this old issue. It proposes a set of formal characteristics differentiating 'collegial' or 'polycratic' organizations from bureaucratic or monocratic ones. He defines collegial organizations as 'those in which there is dominant orientation to a consensus achieved between the members of a body of experts who are theoretically equals in their levels of expertise but who are specialized by area of expertise' (1989: 956). The main organizational characteristics implied by this statement of the principle of collegiality are theoretical knowledge, professional career, formal egalitarianism, formal autonomy, scrutiny of product, collective decision making through committee systems.

Although very helpful, Waters' synthesis remains very formal. It is not sufficient by itself to explain collective action among peers, because it is based almost exclusively on the idea of voluntary contracts, formal structure, and formal consensus. This approach is limited because there are many tensions in the collegium, and there are obvious conflicts between the individual and the collective interest, for which it does not account. What is missing in this approach is a deeper understanding of the social discipline and social processes that help collegial organizations solve typical problems of collective action and cooperation. In my view, a combined neo-Weberian and structural approach is needed for that purpose. This view assumes a conception of actors' rationality that takes into account their contextualization of their own behaviour: their calculations, but also their politicization of their behaviour, exchanges and controls through the use of identifications, status, and norms. This approach provides a deeper view of how such collegial organizations operate, a more realistic picture of the 'collegial phenomenon' (Lazega, 2001) —an expression echoing Michel Crozier's *Bureaucratic phenomenon* (1963). It often questions pervasive discourse on idealized collegiality among peers. As in model approaches such as Crozier's or Peter Blau's (1964), our approach to this phenomenon is based primarily on understanding power in such collective actors. Power is defined as the ability of individuals or groups in the organization to impose their will on others as a result of resource dependencies. In the case of collective action among peers, however, such dependencies are often less permanent and more complex than in bureaucracies. Power is shared, then aggregated upwards to be exercised simultaneously by several positions in a 'polycratic' system. There are also norms concerning this exercise, especially for legitimization of inequality and justification of acceptance of inequality.

The term structural, as it is used here, refers to regularities observed in multiple and informal relationships between members— for example, strongly personalized co-workers' ties, or advice ties, or even friendship ties. Such ties provide access to key production-related resources such as co-workers' goodwill or advice, or to resources that are not directly connected with the production process, such as friendship. In an organization, stable and durable relationships represent multilateral resource interdependencies. They aggregate and combine into an informal pattern of ties that is called 'structure' because it captures many kinds of opportunities and constraints for members in their attempts to manage such resources. It is important to note that, in the Weberian tradition, these social and informal relationships have long been considered by the bureaucratic model as particularistic obstacles to efficient collective action (Perrow 1986). In the collegial model, however, some of these durable relationships become the basis of a social discipline that helps members cooperate and exchange, monitor, pressure, and sanction each other, and negotiate precarious values.

Without such an approach of resource interdependencies and social relationships, it is difficult to understand generic social mechanisms (Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Stinchcombe 1991) that characterize any form of collective action, particularly among rival partners (Bourricaud 1961). The specific mechanisms that help flat or collegial organizations operate are not necessarily comparable to that of more bureaucratic and pyramidal organizations, because they are based on the specificity of resource interdependencies that characterize complex relationships between formally equal partners. Sketching this system for collegial organizations (or for collegial pockets in bureaucratic organizations), therefore, requires specific methods that are able to look into complex resource interdependencies.

This theory of durable cooperation among autonomous professionals thus relies on broadly conceived structural, rational choice and institutional approaches that are combined. To combine these approaches, individuals in organizations must first be seen as interdependent members who need to get access to production-related resources (Blau 1964). Focusing on the social discipline of such settings presupposes a conception of rationality that places at the heart of individual action a strategic capacity to contextualize and politicize behaviour and exchanges. This strategic capacity is most visible in actors' investments in relationships<sup>4</sup> that help actors maintain or attempt to modify an opportunity structure. Contextualization, politicisation and investments in relationships help actors manage their interdependencies, for example through the selection of exchange partners and the maintenance of ties with them. Social ties, in that perspective, are first conduits for resources and second commitments.

A broadly conceived structural theory can thus make behavioural assumptions about members of collegial organizations and their strategies to get access to production-related resources. Actors' politicized view of action (Crozier and Friedberg 1977) includes calculations, but also, in my view, symbolic activity such as selection of, or investments in, relationships guided by appropriateness judgements (based on recognition of identities in the selection of partners) and value judgements (negotiation of precarious values and norms) that allow individuals to handle their exchanges and controls in ways that seem advantageous to them and to their own collective. Commitments presuppose appropriateness judgments<sup>5</sup> that help actors evaluate their behaviour and contextualize or politicise it with the prospect of improving opportunity structure.

In this theory, *niche seeking* and *status competition* are components of actors' strategic rationality. Both represent a specific form of durability in cooperation among strategic and interdependent entrepreneurs who politicize their behaviour by using boundary management to seek relatively closed contexts in which they can find and exchange these resources at a low cost. Once in such contexts, they seek various forms of concentration of these resources so as to be in a position to define the terms of their exchanges. A multilevel dimension is built into this theory based on the notions of niche (in a system of niches) and multidimensional status. Their importance comes from the fact that they are both structurally combined and assumed to be indispensable for individual peers' commitment to a partnership agreement. Together they are basic components of both members' strategic rationality and of a series of generic mechanisms<sup>6</sup> that characterize the social discipline driving collegial organizations. In the following sections I propose a definition of these notions and processes.

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<sup>4</sup> A concept borrowed from Coleman (1990), but used here in a different way.

<sup>5</sup> This approach relies on a symbolic interactionist theory of appropriateness judgments (Lazega, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Such social mechanisms come close to "transformational" mechanisms as defined by Hedström and Swedberg (1998) except that they presuppose a different conception of the relationships between micro, meso and macro levels of social reality.

## **Collegial organizations as bounded-solidarity systems**

Empirical evidence for the existence of social niches tests for the realism of such behavioural assumptions. But niche seeking is also conceived here as a component of a generic social mechanism that produces partial suspension of purely calculating behaviour—that is, bounded solidarity. A test for this efficiency of niches is the detection of the presence of such a solidarity among niche members—for example, through direct reciprocity and generalized exchange. Generalized exchange involves indirect reciprocity—which, in network analytical terms, can be identified through cycles of transfers of resources between at least three actors. Such cycles indicate the existence of this form of social discipline between niche members, which lowers the cost of access to resources and fosters the development of a 'rudimentary group structure' (Blau 1964). Members accept the need to cooperate with others without expecting immediate and direct reciprocity; they count on the fact that it will eventually come back to them indirectly. This establishes a minimal form of task-related solidarity that can be expected by a structural theory of collegial organizations.

However, bounded solidarity among interdependent entrepreneurs is fragile by definition, particularly because its positive effects must be protected from the negative effects of status competition. A structural approach, unlike that of Waters, can expect the organization's exchange system to provide this protection of bounded solidarity. To understand this positive effect of a generic social mechanism, it is useful to focus on the fact that collegial organizations are also deliberative bodies in their production processes. As already mentioned, they can be broken down into small, flexible, multifunctional, and sometimes multidisciplinary work groups that react to complex non-standardized problems to produce quality knowledge-intensive service. This has been documented, for example, in investment banks and corporate law firms (Eccles and Crane 1988; Nelson, 1988). In these flexible and multifunctional partner-associate task forces that process complex problems submitted by clients, work is very intense and interdependence among the members is strong for as long as the case is not closed. Then the task force is dissolved, and the members form different task forces with other colleagues to work on other cases. Partners have to divide the work among the members of their task force and lead this work group through to the client's satisfaction. Activity is thus conducted in temporary work groups in which colleagues can—and often are expected to—share knowledge. In effect, partner-associate task forces constitute the core of temporary task forces that operate through brainstorming and 'status auctions' (Sutton and Hargadon 1996). Professional status competition is thus clearly encouraged among members, across rank differences (practitioner-apprentice, partner-associate), and within ranks.

### *Cultivating and mitigating status competition among peers*

To account for the protection or reinforcement of bounded solidarity, it is useful to look at multiplexity in this exchange system. Since niches are multifunctional, a broadly conceived structural approach can expect multiplexity of ties in the exchange system to help prevent a breakdown of bounded solidarity when status competition gets out of hand. Multiplexity allows for a form of mitigation of status competition among colleagues, thus solving a 'too-many-chefs' problem. The organization can be seen as a 'locally multiplex' or niche-level exchange system—that is, a pattern of ties among members that helps them exchange various resources directly and indirectly, and that allows circulation of production-related resources while mitigating status competition. A case study providing a method to understand multiplex exchange systems as simply as possible is provided in Lazega and



Pattison (1999). This case study illustrates this process by reducing it to the idealtypical interplay of three types of resources that members tend to find in their niche. The first type of resource is commitment to work, or goodwill related to cooperation. The second type of resource is advice (a vital resource in knowledge-intensive organizations). The third type of resource is 'friendship', or role distance, a form of out-of-office socialization and personal support not related to the tasks themselves.

Based on this approach to the functioning of work groups in collegial organizations, the role of interdependence of relationships in the mitigation of status competition can be precisely identified. The logic of the blending of relationships in a multiplex exchange system can be illustrated by an idealtypical process. When deliberating about a case, practitioners and apprentices temporarily play a collegial and egalitarian game in which all arguments have equal weight. Brainstorming based on 'status auctions' puts participants under strong pressure to reach a consensus about a solution to the problem at hand. It is considered useful for finding creative solutions to complex professional problems, but it also creates difficulties that are specific to collegial organizations. In effect, at some point, there is a need for someone, usually the partner in charge, to step in and stop the deliberation. Practitioners' status-based on greater experience, greater skill and judgement, higher seniority, or responsibility to the client—becomes a ground to justify stopping the exchanges of ideas, and making a decision about how the case will be handled and efforts allocated.

Knowledge-intensive work is thus inextricably mixed with status 'games'. Such status games are easily accepted as long as the group succeeds in finding a consensus on collectively designed solutions. However, stopping the deliberation without consensus, as is also often the case, is tricky. Members may withdraw and not be willing to participate fully again. The form of task-related commitment and solidarity established above may quickly disappear. Professional status competition can be stimulating, but can also lead to destructive gridlock. Status conflicts (dissenting partners puffing themselves up) can in turn have negative effects on learning and the circulation of knowledge and experience. Of course, there are moral exhortations to create consensus or defer to the partner in charge, but these can remain artificial and rhetorical. Competition can easily get in the way of cooperation, and professionals know that they can lose control of this process. Status competition is thus a double-edged sword. It is encouraged, but it needs to be contained. Understanding this process of mitigation is made possible by highlighting a specific form of multiplexity among peers—that is, the structural relationship between choices of three important sources of resources in a collegial organization. Two steps characterize (analytically speaking) the mitigation process. A first step witnesses members who work together turning for advice to someone usually within their niche. Configurations in which a co-worker tie and an advice tie appear together (a compound that can be coined 'Blau ties') should be frequent: such configurations represent status competition and the first step of its mitigation by seeking advice from higher status partners. The system of interdependence of ties confirms the existence of a first step in the dynamics of mitigation of status competition.

A second step consists in ensuring that the status competition is not simply transferred higher up, thus creating a domino effect if members of the task force turn to several third parties for advice. The solution is either to bring in only one adviser or to turn to advisers who are themselves strongly connected and able to reach consensus or defer to each other more easily than the brainstorming work group itself. Configurations in which an advice tie and a friendship tie appear together should also be frequent: they represent the use of friendship ties to prevent status competition from continuing among advisers. Note that, in this idealtypical process, work and friendship ties are not combined directly. A specific kind of multiplexity should thus help partners control status competition by facilitating the combined circulation of blended resources. Just as power is depersonalized and then repersonalized in collegial

organizations (Bourricaud 1961), local exchanges of resources in task forces play a role in mitigating status competition because they are personalized in a very selective way.

Empirical analyses looking at how relationships are blended and resources bartered in this case study confirm the existence of this idealtypical process of protection of bounded solidarity from the potentially negative effects of status competition. This is done by stressing the positive effect of specific multiplex exchanges (an analysis of the interlocking of the three production-related relationships) for solving the 'too-many-chefs' problem arising especially from brainstorming. This shows the value of looking at any collegial organization as a multiplex exchange system among interdependent members. Resources transferred and/or exchanged concern the production activity, both directly and indirectly although what brings the members together goes beyond just functional interdependence (Lindenberg 1997).

This multiplex exchange system also fuels social processes useful to economic performance and quality control in collegial organizations. After they make a form of solidarity possible for individualistic entrepreneurs, social niches are useful to the organization by constraining members into increased performance and contribution; they also allow knowledge sharing and thus unobtrusive quality improvements that are often difficult to track in knowledge-intensive work. In many ways, such a system provides structural solutions to structural problems.

### *Relational constraint and economic performance*

Indeed, collegial organizations also rely on niches to pressure members into being productive. A multilevel and multiplex exchange system, inside and outside niches, should be important to various forms of performance. In effect, depending on rules for pooling and distributing resources, it is usually in partners' collective economic interest to produce as much as possible (thus pursuing their individual self-interest indirectly), but it can also be in their individual interest to let others do the work. For quasi-tenured partners, for example, there are often enormous incentives to free-ride. Getting associates to work well is also a problem: although they may be well paid, there is little chance for them to become partners. If partners can free-ride and associates threaten the quality of work, members' commitment to their labour contract (the partnership agreement for partners and the employment contract for associates) is difficult to sustain on a purely economic and legalistic basis. Because, as Durkheim (1893) pointed out, a contract is always incomplete, members need the expectation that it will be fulfilled and a 'project' to sustain these expectations (Reynaud 1989). In other words, the contract must be combined with social ties, such as strong collaboration, advice, and friendship, both at the dyadic level and at the structural level. To show that, in such a situation, an exchange system has an effect on his or her commitment, each member's combination of ties (with all the other members) and position in the firm's relational structure must be examined and related to his or her economic performance.

Niche-level relational pressure is one process by which this opportunistic behaviour is also mitigated. In effect, as already seen, niches provide members with work related resources, a sense of identity and of their long-term interest, but there is also an element of self-entrapment in them. This brings us back to a classical idea that organizational efficiency depends on the quality and configuration of interpersonal relationships between members (see e.g. Lewin 1952). It is not only that people who have more relationships are more assimilated into the organization that makes them perform more on an economic basis. It is also that the structure of these relationships constrains them to do so. At the work-group level, pressure corresponds to high density and cohesion in strong work relationships. As already seen, the generalized exchange system supports cohesive work ties and maintains a specific form of

solidarity. Such a system also constrains some of its members –those with specific relational patterns and work-group membership–into reaching higher economic performance (Lazega 1999). Analytically, this is measured using Burt's constraint scores (1992), which are particularly sensitive to the fact that peers do not discipline each other equally strongly.

### *Status and quality control in knowledge-intensive organizations*

Through status competition and its mitigation, the multiplex exchange system fulfils an additional function in collegial organizations—that of quality control. In such organizations, problems to be solved are often too complex for one person, and decisions to make too uncertain (Waters 1989). Usually, complexity has its source in the necessity of a division of work (Durkheim 1893). But collegial organizations have added problems of complexity to solve in order to satisfy their clients. What is highly interesting in these organizations is the institutional production of certainty and simplicity. This is why these organizations are particularly common in professional work, where the core task of the worker is to achieve this certainty in a practical way (Dingwall 1976; Dingwall and Fenn 1987). There are many reasons— in any knowledge-intensive organization handling complex and non-routine problems, relying on innovation, and operating in a competitive environment—to try to enhance the quality of work. Knowledge-based services are evaluated by their level of quality, which is also difficult to measure. Maintaining such a level is thus a problem for such firms. There is something about certainty-work that makes it difficult to pin down into an organization, although it may depend upon organizational resources for its accomplishment. Formal ex-post methods, such as official peer-review committees, are considered costly, difficult to implement, often inefficient, and too strongly politicized. A structural approach argues that the firm relies on its exchange system to provide an informal, structural, and preventive solution to this problem of quality control.

Collegial organizations count on a more proactive form of quality control—for example, the fact that its members seek each other's second opinions and share their experiences before they make decisions or send opinions out to clients. In the status competition process, members observe and evaluate (mostly informally) each other's production: they praise big successes, and indirectly sanction (that is, criticize and gossip about) blunders and mistakes (Bosk 1979). When they seek third parties for advice during the mitigation process, they do so first within their own niche. Thus, collegial organizations also rely on social niches to facilitate quality control when formal peer-review systems fail to produce results. Knowledge construction depends on these social relationships. Reasoning exclusively in terms of human capital, as economists and management theories have done for a long time, presupposes that, once in business, members freely share their knowledge and experience with one another. Rather, a structural theory views quality control as depending on status auctions and competition. It is in members' collective economic interest to share information and experience as much as possible, but it is also in their individual interest—given the status competition process—to do so while increasing as much as possible their individual credit by stressing the value of their own knowledge and experience. Therefore, the niche is certainly where status competition and knowledge management happen at the same time. But members also compete by expanding out of the local task force and niche boundaries to reach and use sources of advice with firm-wide status. This leads to the hypothesis of a very centralized and hierarchical pattern in advice networks, in which a few members of collegial organizations are the key to quality control because they accumulate and distribute knowledge and experience in the firm.

These members are sought out for advice by their peers regardless of niche boundaries because they have professional status. The issue here is not so much who knows what, but who has the authority to know, and how is this authority negotiated, constructed, and maintained. In effect, advisers often do not have more technical information to solve a problem; rather they are in a position to take responsibility for decisions regarding quality. Attention to one aspect of a case rather than to another may be the object of a debate. Authority to know helps members impose a certain focus of attention during and after a deliberation. In the selection of relevant and appropriate information, actors need the authority to make an issue salient: peers with status can impose that. Knowledge cannot be shared without authority arguments allowing selected members to assert their authority to know.

Since members tend to work together in temporary task forces nested in more stable niches, it is likely that they will find advisers with this authority to know within this niche. But it is also likely that they will find them outside the niche, thus using resources provided by the firm as a whole (firm-wide status of specific partners) to manage local problems raised by the work process. It allows such members to impose their standards and criteria of quality and to perform much of the firm's proactive quality control. Indeed, one of the informal rules related to the circulation of advice within collegial organizations is the seniority rule: one does not seek advice from people 'below'. This concentration of the authority to know may be paradoxical in an organization where members are jealous of their formal professional discretion and individual authority to know. But this social process of capitalization and sharing of knowledge works only because it is informal<sup>7</sup>.

### **Collegial organizations as lateral control regimes**

One of the central problems of collegial organizations is dealing with behaviour perceived to be opportunistic. The issue of conformity is of particular importance in formally egalitarian bodies in which free-rider problems quickly arise. As mentioned in the Introduction, direct command or the use of administrative hierarchy are not considered appropriate means for exercising control, because professionals have many ways of neutralizing formal authority (Freidson 1975, 1986; Gouldner 1954). Therefore, a second-order free-rider problem arises as well—the problem of who will bear the costs of monitoring and enforcement among the formally equal members (Cartwright 1965; Hechter 1984; Heckathorn 1989, 1990; Kandel and Lazear 1992; Oliver 1980; Yamagishi 1986). Collegial organizations, even when they do not shy away from monitoring collective economic efficiency, need ways of controlling and pressuring members or task forces other than hierarchy. Unable to pull rank on peers, members of collegial organizations need decentralized controls. How do such controls operate and deal with the costs of control?

Here the existence of multiplex and personalized ties in social niches, as well as status competition, are again essential to providing an answer<sup>8</sup>. The way in which a formally egalitarian organization gains 'quasi-voluntary compliance' (Levi 1988) with its rules and

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<sup>7</sup> For more about this issue and about other problems such as balancing the powers of partners with different kinds of status in collegial organizations, see Lazega (2000b)

<sup>8</sup> Theories of collective action have already shown that conformity of members to the rules governing the management of common resources requires social control and informal conflict resolution mechanisms (Black 1984; Coleman 1990; Ellickson 1991; Fortado 1994; Hechter 1984, 1987; Heckathorn 1990; Lazega 2000a; Lindenberg 1993; Morrill 1995; Ostrom 1990; Reynaud 1989; Taylor 1987; Wittek 1999). Compliance to the rules is contingent on the compliance by others, and therefore members spend time and energy monitoring each other. Infraactors are likely to be allocated graduated sanctions by other members, by officials accountable to these members, or by both. Such sanctions range from economic losses to social marginalization, then finally to expulsion.

agreements must be explained by looking at how costly graduated and unobtrusive ways (through which such pressures are exercised) are considered to be. Enforcement through negative sanctions can be costly for the sanctioner, particularly when control is mobilized for the protection of the common good in a formally egalitarian body. Attempting to put pressure on other members on behalf of the firm can be costly in relational terms: infractors may accumulate resentment, partners may blame the sanctioner—especially if he or she has personal ties to the deviant party—for failing to achieve results. The issue thus becomes: how then does the organization keep costs of enforcement low? As noted by Bourricaud (1961: 385), Reynaud (1989), and Ostrom (1990), sanctions are not usually automatic. They are not independent of the person who applies them, of the person to whom they are applied, and of the characteristics and relationships of both. Any process of early monitoring and sanctioning must therefore help select sanctioners and build access to infractors. Elsewhere (Lazega, 2000a; Lazega and Krackhardt, 2000) I have argued that informal processes contribute to maintaining low costs, in particular the politicized use of social resources or relationships between members, as well as a specific form of status called 'protector of the common good'. Practitioners are reluctant to invest systematically their own personal ties for the protection of the common good when the target is not part of their own social niche and relational capital. They also do not have enough such personal ties to cover the entire partnership. They are thus forced to make choices outside their niche and personal network—hence the pressure exercised on some members to become such protectors.

In effect, a structural approach asserts that, the more I need to control others whose job is important to me so that I can do my own job, and the more important are the relationships with these others, the more likely it is that I will have an informal and personalized way of monitoring and sanctioning them that signals that I am interested in these relationships. As part of what Freidson calls 'the rule of the collegium', members tend to avoid open face-to-face conflicts, as well as direct and coercive exercises of power. Therefore, graduated sanctions start with convergent expressions of normative expectations, unobtrusive and unsolicited advice and the spread of gossip. In Freidson and Rhea's words (1963), colleagues informally 'talk to' infractors in order to curb behaviour perceived to be unprofessional or opportunistic. In effect, social ties provide access to infractors and focus their attention, because they represent the existence of underlying resource dependencies. In Mintzberg's words (1979), there is 'mutual adjustment' among peers working in 'ad hoc organizations'. Others refer to this process as gaining 'quasi-voluntary compliance' (Levi 1988), or as achieving autonomous regulation (Reynaud 1989), concertive control (Barker 1993), or compliant control (Heckathorn 1990). Colleagues show infractors that lack of conformity has been detected, must be discussed, and may involve external social costs, such as marginalization or stopping exchanges at various levels. Because interdependent partners need social resources to perform effectively, they are also more exposed to pressures from partners who control these resources. These processes do not necessarily guarantee by themselves that peers will be able to maintain an enduring institution, but a structural theory asserts that any complex system of rules needs them to survive over time. Little is known about the selection of early sanctioners and monitors among peers—among whom applying rules is never unambiguous because monitors, infractors, and sanctioners are all formally equals. Many views of influence assume that it is based on solidary relations, such as friendship (Breiger 1990; Granovetter 1985). It can be argued that such relations provide channels through which disputes can be mediated before they escalate (Lazega and Vari 1992; Morrill 1995). There is a relationship between cost of control and choices of suitable sanctioners in the collegial organization. This selection and underlying expectations are influenced by factors such as formal dimensions of structure, and by relative status of the protagonists of the control drama (interdependence and

control over resources). It is driven by the convergence of colleagues' expectations, which together exercise a constraint on levers of social control to intervene.

Collegial organizations are thus characterized by lateral control regimes. I use the word regime to stress that selection of sanctioners (and the whole social mechanism) is politicized in a normative way. The type of relational influence examined here among peers is based on two dimensions of collective action: on the one hand, common interests and resource dependencies; on the other hand, normative prescriptions regarding, for example, avoidance of conflict escalation. In a collegial context, important sanctioners should also be less controversial than others: they should be able to speak on behalf of the firm without raising controversies, and without triggering additional conflicts, or being suspected of representing specific coalitions, or individually benefiting from exercising pressure. Influence stems from members' utilitarian logic—from their considerations of potential losses in social resources or costs incurred when exercising (or being subject to) early monitoring and sanctioning—but also from an informal consensus that emerges from a trained capacity of all partners to choose lateral sanctioners. Members do use their relationships, or 'spend' their own relational capital for the purpose of enforcing collective decisions. However, they use it to protect their own relational capital. In order to make lateral control function beyond their social niche, they also build up collective and convergent expectations that designate, for the same purpose, a limited number of members with a protector-of-the-common-good status to enforce their previous agreements. Such a social construction of the status of protectors is inseparable from normative considerations.

In sum, when the total cost of control can constitute a severe constraint on any group's ability to attain solidarity and reproduce itself, knowledge of this lateral control regime helps to understand how members keep monitoring costs low, and therefore keep themselves motivated to carry on monitoring each other. The structural approach contributes to a theory of collective action among peers, particularly by identifying a pattern that is both structural and normative in peers' mutual monitoring of conformity to a set of their own rules.

### **Collegial organizations and the regulatory process**

As emphasized above, solidarity and compliance require social norms. This points to the third generic mechanism for which a broadly conceived structural perspective needs to account: the redefinition of the rules of the game by the members. In addition to building niches as appropriate contexts for part of their exchanges, members compete for status and the power to define the terms of these exchanges. It is therefore useful to emphasize the interpenetration of the interactional and cultural realms, of interdependencies and values, and to contend that contracts and resource dependencies are not sufficient by themselves to maintain cohesion and solidarity in a social group. Members need to commit themselves to priorities in a system of norms and values that contribute to make these contracts meaningful and enforceable. This is particularly the case in organizations where members have regulatory interests and rights, and are confronted with issues that require principled and long-term choices between policy options.

More specifically, this relationship between interdependencies and values can be approached by questions such as how the resource dependencies among members of an organization—as an indication of power relationships among them—eventually affect the capacity of their social group to change its own rules, including important rules such as that related to the distribution of resources among themselves. The Parsonian approach (Parsons 1951) to culture is useful here to look at some aspects of the interplay between structure and norms, if only at the regulatory stage of this interplay. In effect, rules are expressed in policy

options and they also represent underlying values. They can thus be considered to be cultural characteristics of the organization. This is consistent with traditional sociological thinking: a system of interpersonal relations and exchanges driving a system of production, on the one hand, and a system of norms, values, or symbols, on the other hand, are inseparable. Through the latter, individuals orient themselves reciprocally in a stable and consistent frame of anticipation (Bourricaud 1961: 77). Members try to promote their own personal interests in their exchanges. But they have to do this by defending values that help them redefine the terms of these exchanges. In turn, however, this assertion and defence of values is itself a structurally constrained process that maintains a form of regulatory stability in the organization. Consequently, it often favours the status quo.

Building on Weber's and on Merton's work (1957), Selznick (1957) combines structure and norms by using the notion of precarious values. As mentioned in the Introduction, precarious value is one that is essential to the viability of the collectivity but in which most members may have no direct stake. It is always in danger of losing its flag carriers and representatives—that is, active support from organized interest groups and elites (at the societal level) that helps preserve it as a candidate for top priority on the list of all competing values. Values are preserved, within organizations, by subunits entrusted with that preservation. Client satisfaction, internal coordination, innovation and quality of professional knowledge, societal needs, and employee interests would not be defended if not represented by powerful subunits or members for which the values in question are paramount (Simpson 1971).

Like any organization, collegial ones have many goals, and hence a chronic lack of normative integration. Members of an organization, especially a collegial one, do not have rigid overarching 'common values' (Crozier and Friedberg 1977). Normative integration, sociologists have long argued, is achieved by an ongoing debate over rules, norms, and values fuelled by incompatibility between different interests and different forms of status (Kellerhals et al. 1988). As shown by many authors (Dingwall 1999; Freidson 1999; Hughes 1958), professional rules and values, in addition to the law, are the key to the structuring of collective action among professional colleagues. Actors, if they want to win, sometimes have to redefine their priorities in terms of values (Friedberg 1993). For example, partners feel free to develop and change their own conception of professionalism. They calculate their interests, but they also 'negotiate' their values (Kuty 1998). They fuel debates concerning professionalism, especially when members with superior economic power (for example, controlling access to large and lucrative clients) try to impose their own hierarchy of values, their own rules of the game, and their own terms for multiplex exchanges. For example, in decisions of recruitment through cooptation, peers often reach a conflict between loyalty (typically clientelistic criterion) and excellence (ideally bureaucratic and professional criterion).

In particular, a debate about norms is restarted when policies have to be adjusted. Managerial, professional, and entrepreneurial ideologies can conflict in the definition of organizational policies. The 'regulatory' debate among members focuses on the rules that they define for their collective action, the 'rules of the game' (Reynaud 1989). Negotiating precarious values is the ultimate way for members to politicise their exchanges and indirectly seek favourable terms for them. The context of this debate, the conditions under which it is pre-structured, is a basic micro-political issue that raises the question of participation in change.

This points to a process of upstream pre-structuring of the negotiation of precarious values that is central to collective action among peers. In collegial organizations, a variety of subunits and constituencies try to exercise power and defend precarious values through conflicts with other subunits that support other values. Members with status who interpret the partnership agreement and 'read' its underlying norms belong to such subgroups representing

a precarious value. Their status is a temporary claim to interpret or redefine a norm in an attempt to convince oneself and others to comply 'voluntarily' to the current rules of the game. They influence policy making and debates about professional behaviour more than other members. For example, administrators—or minders—can step in to arbitrate when conflicts threaten to get out of hand. But their hierarchical status can be challenged, especially on behalf of various conceptions of professionalism.

Note that, up to now, characteristics of the collegial organization were derived from the work process itself. It could be argued that the process of task-related mitigation of status competition works also for reaching regulatory decisions—that is, choices concerned with organizational policy making. But regulatory decisions involve formally all peers, and therefore it is important here to come back to the more commonly accepted context of government by committee (Baylis, 1989; Waters 1989; Wheare 1955) in order to look at the main mechanism used by collegial organizations to manage potential tensions between different values and norms underlying policy options. Contrary to Waters's assessment, however, there are several essential features of debates on professionalism that differ from simple orientation to the best specialized knowledge. In particular, no member can have the last word, once and for all, in such formal discussions. Moreover, a single member can dramatize lack of consensus on various issues and prevent consensus building. A *modus vivendi* is, therefore, usually established among peers. In formal committees and deliberations, such as partnership meetings, debates would be endless if not structured by a mechanism that selects members who will carry more weight than others in regulatory work. A structural approach helps in understanding, in part, this *modus vivendi* and its construction. The latter is in fact an oligarchic process even in a one-person-one-vote organization (Dahl 1985). In effect, peers' participation in the regulatory debate is informally restricted. I have argued elsewhere (2001) that only multi-status members with locally inconsistent forms of status (i.e. 'multi-status oligarchs') are in a position to help their peers in reaching a temporary form of consensus about priorities in such values.

The relationships between interests, values, and policies are not direct and straightforward. A social mechanism characterizing the regulatory deliberation among peers introduces complex status games that weigh on policy decisions. As a social mechanism, this form of regulatory deliberation invoking precarious values has a structural basis. It is particularly important in an organization with many goals and not much normative integration. In spite of strong pressure towards consensus in many types of collegial organizations, this political process maintains an underlying turbulence of critical debates. Recall that such debates are important to prevent standardization and bureaucratization of any firm.

A broadly conceived structural approach provides a theory of collective action among peers. This theory takes into account three generic social mechanisms that help to solve the most important problems facing collegial organizations. It uses behavioural assumptions about members' strategic rationality (their niche seeking and their involvement in competition for status) as driving forces for exchanges, controls, and regulation. These mechanisms have a strong informal dimension but nevertheless contribute to the governance of the organization. They provide structural solutions to problems familiar to interdependent entrepreneurs, such as how to cultivate and mitigate status competition; how to maintain performance, quality, and controls; and finally how to maintain organizational integration and help with the negotiation of precarious professional values. In sum, this theory explains the ways in which



legally constraining economic contracts and informal social mechanisms are combined to sustain cooperation among collaborating professionals who are often also rival partners<sup>9</sup>.

### **Holding one's own in the company of peers**

This approach shows that the collegial form raises social problems that challenge both the sociology of organizations and the sociology of the professions. A theory of collegiality is intellectually useful because it provides a theory of collective action that is truly disentangled from the Weberian bureaucratic model. However, many social problems that are not dealt with in current sociology of organizations and the professions come attached to this approach.

This form of organization offers its members many ways to carve a place for themselves in the group. They compete for a great variety of forms of status, which is socially integrative—as long as they are focused on work. However, in spite of what more idealistic approaches to cooperation would assert (Desroche 1976; Meister 1972), it is at the same time a socially very constraining environment (Barker 1993). The social discipline and forms of collective responsibility underlying collective action among peers are important components of knowledge-intensive work and of flat organizations. But they are also very demanding. Particularistic ties matter for governance of organizations in a systematic way when a balance between niche seeking and status competition is maintained so as to help generic social mechanisms. Such a balance is difficult to achieve. Knowledge-intensive collective actors are not suited to kinder gentler coordination. They are generally organizations in which rival partners or interdependent entrepreneurs need to become even more strategic (in areas of their lives that were left outside the standard work relationships in more typical bureaucracies), and then find niches where strategic and opportunistic behaviour can be suspended.

The issues of multidimensionality of status and status competition, in particular, change the relationship between the individual and the group in collegial settings, when compared to more monocratic and bureaucratic ones. Status is not only based on seniority and money; it has a particularly strong dimension of prestige, of symbolic recognition of a member's contribution, and of ongoing critical judgements about members' quality. To define their place in the group, members need to invest in a form of status, cultivate status competition and learn how to mitigate it, and defend a conception of 'professionalism'. Whether or not each of them tries to become a *primus inter pares* in some way (economic, managerial, professional), they always have to get involved in the complex task-oriented exchange system of the firm. This is a much more stressful form of organizational assimilation than in many bureaucratic organizations, one that requires adjustments to highly complex and personalized mechanisms for solidarity and control.

Partnerships or their functional equivalent bring together partners with great incentives to run their business well and invest in the group. It is less easy for such members to stay away from the risks of participation. Withdrawal from the group is less likely than in bureaucratic organizations, even if collegial and participationist utopias have their limits. The existence of social niches means that one must learn to personalize (embed) and depersonalize (disembed) work relationships and business transactions. This may amount to increased exploitation, as in the case of associates, if they can be dropped before reaping the return on such—often ambiguous and demanding—relational investments. It becomes increasingly difficult to externalise social costs in such organizations. Often, there are not many persons outside the organization (such as family or friends) ready to incur such costs when they reach

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<sup>9</sup> The collegial form and its characteristic social mechanisms remain idealtypical. For a discussion of the scope of the collegial form and the variables suggesting paths for generalization of its social discipline to knowledge intensive firms, see Lazega (2001).

a certain level. More research is thus needed on how actors can hold their own in such a context of intense personalization and depersonalization of work relationships for exchange, control, and regulation.

A broadly conceived structural approach assumes –as seen above– that members have to become political players in order to hold their own and defend their interests in such collegial organizations. Since professional practitioners in knowledge-intensive organizations are often formally equal, they have to allow each other to speak on behalf of the collective and recognize each other's regulatory interests. This implies that informal authority of members with status is based not only on control of all sorts of resources (important clients, workforce, day-to-day operations, technical competence, experience), but also on their capacity to manipulate relationships to create consensus, on their firm-specific strategic culture. By this I mean a political know-how allowing them to be players in a power game de-emphasizing unilateral impositions of strength and encouraging learning and mutual prescription in negotiations. This requires a capacity to share with others a certain code of collegial relations and an ideology of collegiality (Frischkopf 1973)—that is, a certain conception of professionalism. For example, the mix of an adversarial and pushy professional culture, on the one hand, and of personalized and unobtrusive lateral control, on the other hand, are not always easy to combine for partners in a corporate law firm. This also requires rhetorical manipulation of an ideology of collegiality in debates about professionalism, especially when members with market power try to pressure others for consensus around their own conception of professionalism.

Forwarding one's own interests while at the same time contributing to the protection of common resources, and to the maintenance of long-term institutional arrangements, is a difficult task. Seen from the outside of collegial organizations, strategies for handling potentially negative effects of status competition—such as preventing task forces from being too stable, relying on mitigating friendship ties, plotting peer-driven 'police' intervention on behalf of collective interests—may seem unrealistic or paradoxical. From within, they must be learned and shrewdly used. Similarly, understanding interdependencies is the key to establishing a partial order at the structural level through manipulations of relationships and subsequent social mechanisms. For example, niche members' 'bounded solidarity' picks up their structural equivalence and makes it indispensable for firm-level solidarity. Although niche-building/seeking members are entitled to participate in regulatory activity, to speak up in partnership meetings, and to claim their share of status, they also have to subscribe to priorities among many common goals, learn how to exchange in highly multiplex and personalized situations, and do all this in ways considered acceptable and legitimate by their peers. In other words, cooperating peers have to be willing and able to play politics—the complexity of which is only sketched in this paper.

In sum, a combined neo-Weberian and structural approach clearly raises and disentangles key questions with regard to collective action among peers in professional and knowledge-intensive organizations characterizing modern societies. But one of the main questions raised by this approach is that of the willingness of individuals to invest so much in their professional lives. This points to the problem of a new relationship to work in a knowledge-intensive, organizational society characterized by 'flexible' labour markets and multilateral relationships between all sorts of 'stakeholders'. I argue that failure to take into account the social mechanisms that help rival peers design structural solutions to problems of collective action would mean failure of economic sociology to understand how an increasing number of individuals defend their interests in this organizational society<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The issue of polycracy and collegiality has serious regulatory implications too, ones that should also be of closer interest to the sociology of the professions and economic sociology. In other words, the social discipline and mechanisms at work here raise questions about the capacity of professions to respect their ethical

## Conclusion

Where work cannot be routinized, Taylorism is inappropriate. The shift from goods to services, the spread and penetration of mass culture, and the endless potential for technological innovation all suggest that production will increasingly be characterized by complexity and variability. From the consumer's perspective, as well, the market cannot guarantee quality because of profound informational asymmetries with producers and the consumer's difficulty (indeed, virtual impossibility) of evaluating the service before it is consumed. Hence the persistence—despite decades of debunking—of what Elliot Freidson (2001) calls *Professionalism: The Third Logic*. Much of the interest in professionalism has centred around how to fulfil its promises to consumers. Other leading scholars in the sociology of the professions, such as Abel (2003), think that professionalism's promises are largely fraudulent efforts to deny consumers the benefits of market competition without delivering compensating guarantees of quality and integrity.

Here I tried to provide a different approach to the problem by focusing on producers and the problems of collective action among peers. These include: getting, organizing, and doing work; maintaining quality; distributing income; preserving unity; reproducing workers; controlling deviance; and balancing continuity with change. One can address these questions by studying the internal dynamics of professional firms. This helps in identifying conflicting trends of rationalization through bureaucracy and through collegiality. Competition between the two trends characterizes an increasingly large area of production, as it becomes knowledge-intensive.

In spite of the difficulties raised by durable cooperation among rival peers, knowledge of mechanisms fleshing out rationalisation through collegiality can help members of collegial settings, whether recognized professionals or not. Many social mechanisms are not beyond the control of interdependent entrepreneurs involved in unstandardized decision-making or production. This knowledge can help manage and lower the costs of many moments of workplace democracy that they can achieve. Societies whose economy is increasingly based on sophisticated knowledge will increasingly depend on such organizations for competitive advantage. There should also be much to learn from extending this broadly conceived structural approach to any formally democratic system, action, and regulatory change. In my view, this kind of knowledge would generally contribute to more democracy and accountability in the organizational society.

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commitments and to regulate themselves –most notably in the business world, the recent Enron case being emblematic of this point. Collegial self-governance and collective responsibility often conflict with professional rules of ethics on behalf of the profession's economic privileges. Ethical commitments are a key area on which a broadly conceived structural approach to collegial organizations, particularly professional services firms, can shed some light. For a specific treatment of this topic based on the management of conflicts of interests in corporate law firms (collegial organizations that are unable, like many others, to make unfriendly decisions, especially on a weekly basis) see for example Lazega (1994).

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