Theoretical elements concerning the deprofessionalization of social work

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ENG Abstract. Modern professions are a fundamental element in social organization. The professions are currently experiencing a moment of transformation as a result of social changes such as neoliberalism, bureaucracy, technocratization, the precariousness of contractual relationships and universal access to information. Social work is not immune to the impact of these changes, which represent a challenge for the definition and the social recognition of the profession as well as impacting the problems of social identification and identity of social work. This article presents the main implications of the theory of deprofessionalization as well as the implications of the civic paradigm, postprofessionalization and reprofessionalization for social work and for the construction of a profession that reflects its own values, ethics and social essence, thereby reducing the discomfort felt among its professionals.
Keywords: Social work; deprofessionalization; proletarianization; postprofessionalization; reprofessionalization; civic paradigm.

ES Elementos teóricos en torno a la desprofesionalización del trabajo social

Resumen. Las profesiones modernas son un elemento fundamental en la organización social. En el momento actual, las profesiones viven un momento de transformación a consecuencia de cambios sociales, como el neoliberalismo, la burocratización, la tecnocratización, la precarización de las relaciones contractuales y el acceso universal a la información. Estos cambios no son ajenos al Trabajo Social y suponen un reto para la profesión tanto en su definición como en su reconocimiento social. Además, estos cambios ahondan en los problemas de identificación social e identidad del Trabajo Social como profesión. En este artículo, por un lado, se presentan las principales implicaciones de la teoría de la desprofesionalización y, por otro, se exponen las implicaciones del paradigma cívico, la postprofesionalización y la reprofesionalización para el Trabajo Social, y para la construcción de una profesión en consonancia con los valores, la ética y la esencia social de la profesión, reduciendo el malestar sentido entre sus profesionales.
Palabras clave: Trabajo Social; Desprofesionalización; Proletarización; Postprofesinalización; Reprofesionalización; Paradigma cívico.

Sumario. 1. Theoretical introduction to the process of (de)professionalization applied to Social Work. 2. The definition of the deprofessionalization thesis. 3. Deprofessionalization through the erosion of the monopoly of expert knowledge. 4. Deprofessionalization through the practice of the expert role. 5. Deprofessionalization due to subordination to the political-mercantile institution. 6. Proletarianization through the thesis of deprofessionalization. 7. Theoretical-practical lines that reinforce the professionalization of Social Work: Postprofessionalization and reprofessionalization and the civic paradigm in Social Work. 8. Final considerations. 9. Bibliographical references.

1. Theoretical introduction to the process of (de)professionalization applied to Social Work

Professions are a characteristic feature of modern societies and persist in postmodern societies, to the extent that it is impossible to understand societies without their presence. In service and information societies, professions are constituted as new forms of capital and new forms of organization (Rodríguez, 2008a). Knowing the professions allows us to understand how public and private services to citizens are structured.

In Spain, the construction of social services and the history of the profession of Social Work are so intertwined that they cannot be understood separately. Social services are the connatural space of Social Work as a profession and have been established at the beginning of the principles and values of Social Work.

In the Social Work developed in Spain, there has remained a debate about its identity (endogenous factors) and its identification (exogenous factors), which means that there is a deficit in feeling the value and professional power of Social Work in relation to other professions. This has led to a general feeling of unease among social workers, particularly those working in social services. This debate began in the 1960s and spread in the 1980s with the expansion of the profession in the social services system. Evidence of this can be found in the studies by Estruch and Güell (1976), Llovet and Usieto (1990), Pelegrí (1995), Brezmes (2008) and Martín Estalayo (2013). Currently, the debate continues, as evidenced by the results of the IV Social Services Report, which reports on the risk of deprofessionalization of Social Work in the present and the future (Vicente et al., 2022). The endogenous and exogenous factors involved in the process of deprofessionalization in Spain are summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Factors contributing to the deprofessionalization of Social Work in Spain

Factors identified in the literature that undermine the professional autonomy of social work in Spain	
From the inside – Endogenous (Structural deficits)	The problem of identity and identification due to the distancing from the preceding Francoist and religious period.
	Reduction of specific Social Work subjects and practical theoretical training in university education.
	Lack of assumption, in the awareness and work of professionals, of the contradictory and ambiguous nature of Social Work.
	Accommodation in "soft" tasks (bureaucratic, information and management). Promotion and prevention tasks are relegated to the task of rationally allocating resources.
	A decrease in the number of professionals who practice with an attitude/vocation for social transformation, this being the benchmark for which the profession was born.
	A feminized profession with little feminist training. In their professional work, they project the tasks of care and protection, their ethical and altruistic motivation and their commitment to humanity.
	The profession, which has been built up since democracy, is young and has few scientific publications. Third-level training has only recently been achieved, so scientific research is still rare.
	Internal weaknesses of the colleges in relation to specialized training, the defense of working conditions and the profession's leadership in social change.
From outside – Exogenous (Threats)	Unemployment from 1995 onwards. The period of maximum recruitment was the one experienced after the approval of the "*Plan Concertado de Prestaciones Básicas 1987*" and the approval of the autonomous laws on Social Services until 1995. Thus, the profession expanded at the same time as the public Social Services system did. In the following years, recruitment took place in civil society organizations.
	Chronic unease in the profession due to the instability of the welfare state and the lack of a concrete definition of its purpose.
	The social policy that favours privatization contributes to the creation of clientelistic relations with the third sector. In 1980, the recognition of Social Services as a system of public responsibility obeyed the reason of accommodating all social agents on equal terms, understanding the diversity of agents as richness and potential. The current model introduces imbalance through funding (contracting via subsidies and agreements), as measures of control, cuts and cost savings, establishing a model based on the outsourcing and privatization of the management of social services. In these entities, the contracts are smaller, more precarious and more volunteers from the profession are employed to carry out tasks of professional responsibility.
	Charitable and philanthropic tradition in Spain, involving welfare and paternalistic approaches. These contrast with the profession's origins in social and political mobilization.
	Social ignorance, confusion among social professions and social image as a control agent due to a weak development of the free exercise of the profession.
	Little recognition by other professions and by politicians. Plots of land occupied by other professions are perceived as intrusive.
	Bureaucratization that leads, on the one hand, to an emphasis on care and palliation, and, on the other hand, to an image of the professional as a "resource manager", instead of the professional being "a resource for intervention".

Own elaboration.

The objectives of this research are: one, to contribute the thesis of deprofessionalization and proletarianization as a framework for understanding the situation of Social Work in the institutional framework of public social services in Spain; and two, to incorporate the theory of reprofessionalization, postprofessionalization and the civic paradigm to reconnect Social Work with its essential and constitutive elements of the profession, in order to reduce the aforementioned feeling of unease.

The methodology used to achieve these objectives was to carry out a literature review in the databases of Dialnet, World Wide Science, SciELO and Google Scholar on studies on the professionalization, deprofessionalization and proletarianization of Social Work at national and international level. The keywords used were: "deprofessionalization" OR "professionalization" OR "proletarization" AND "Social Work" in both English and Spanish. From the articles found and used for this research (mainly their relation to Social Work), the original sources of each discursive line of the debate were sought through searches in online databases or through the inter-library loan service (University of Valladolid and National University of Distance Education).

This article briefly presents the key elements for understanding the processes at work in the (de) professionalization of Social Work.

2. The definition of the deprofessionalization thesis

If the thesis of professionalization serves to define the elements that make up a profession, it is also useful to note the elements that are disappearing, or at least are being transformed, so that "the model [of professionalization] adapts to the hypothesis of deprofessionalization, that is, to the loss of some of these defining factors" (Martín-Moreno and de Miguel, 1982, p.156). Thus, the process of (de)professionalization must be understood as a continuum and dialectically, between professionalization, deprofessionalization and the deconstruction of both concepts[1] .

Haug (1975) writes his article *The Deprofessionalization of Everyone?* paraphrasing Wilensky's (1964) classic work *The Professionalization of Everyone?* and lays the foundation for the deprofessionalization thesis. In doing so, Haug identifies the deprofessionalization thesis as including:

> The erosion of the monopoly of knowledge as a result of increasing levels of public schooling, sophistication and specialization in patient (user) education, as well as computerization – changing patterns of accessibility – new divisions of labour, which spread practical skills and information more widely. The consequences are declining confidence in professional decisions and declining professional power and authority over clients. Ideological challenges to professional status accompany these processes, suggesting a deprofessionalized future (p. 197).

According to Guillén (1990), deprofessionalization refers to the process whereby:

> The professional monopoly of knowledge is being eroded by improvements in the level of education of the population, the division of professional labour (specialization), the desire of consumers to control professionals and to achieve professional justice, the aggregation of clients in bureaucratic environments and the use of computers. As a result, professionals lose power, autonomy and authority (pp. 42-43).

Deprofessionalization can be defined as the process of disqualification, deskilling and decapitalization of a profession, resulting in the loss of autonomy in its professional practice, monopoly control over its knowledge and social recognition. Two subprocesses can be distinguished: the first is deskilling, in which the tasks of design are fragmented from those of execution, knowledge from doing, and theory from practice (Harris & White, 2013); and the second is the fragmentation of complex tasks into simple ones, so that their execution can be carried out by unqualified personnel. This process has been termed digital taylorization (Fabricant, 1985; Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011).

3. Deprofessionalization through the erosion of the monopoly of expert knowledge

With regard to knowledge as monolithic and expert knowledge, it should be noted that with the universalization of education and access to information and communication technologies, there is a more technically literate public, which closes the "information gap" between professionals and their clientele. The result is a public that is more demanding and less willing to submit to the expertise of professionals (Haug, 1972).

Similarly, Rodríguez (2008a) points out that the dissemination of knowledge and the equalization between professionals and their addressees is a crucial factor in the transformation of professions and their deprofessionalization. As a result, deprofessionalization affects the training system of the professions in such a way as to reduce the training requirements necessary to perform the job (Dressel, Walters, Sweat, Clayton Jr & Chandler-Clayton, 1988).

Edgar Borgatta and Rhonda Montgomery (2000) summarize the characteristics of deprofessionalization as the loss of control over monolithic knowledge, the loss of monopoly in the face of competition from other professions, the loss of autonomy in professional practice and the loss of public recognition as an authority. Table 2 summarizes the main factors involved in the process of deprofessionalization in relation to monolithic and expert knowledge and the most immediate consequences for the future of the professions.

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[1]   Such as postprofessionalization and reprofessionalization, theoretical concepts that will be discussed below.

Table 2. Features contributing to the process of deprofessionalization and consequences for the professions

Factors in the deprofessionalization thesis				
Features	Increasing the level of public education.	Increasing the level of specialised knowledge of the public.	Division of labour within a professional group.	Increased accessibility through computerisation.
Consequences	Erosion of monolithic knowledge.	Loss of confidence in professionals.	Blurring of the boundaries between professions.	Loss of prestige, autonomy, power and authority.

Own elaboration based on Haug (1975), Guillén (1990), Borgatta & Montgomery (2000) and Iturrieta (2014).

In all cases, the literature suggests that deprofessionalization implies the loss of exclusive and monolithic knowledge. These theories are based on the notion of the professional as a "neutral technical expert" (using the terminology of Friedson, 2003), which in itself, for Social Work, is a factor of deprofessionalization (Iturrieta, 2014).

Thus, Iturrieta (2014) argues that 1) Social Work does not possess exclusive knowledge. Only material assistance seems to be its professional monopoly. Socio-economic reporting constitutes a very specific and limited area of professional monopoly "as there is no evidence of other types of professional functions or actions" that form part of this monopoly[2] (p. 357). He goes on to argue that "there is no evidence of the allocation of new functions in Social Work, as it continues to be linked to the field of micro-social intervention" (p. 358). And 2) the divergence between desired Social Work and realized Social Work (between what is said to be done and what is done). Practitioners have an inhomogeneous vision of their profession, which differs from that of employers, "which reveals a profession in a process of readjustment, with diffuse cultural and economic closures, which could be an indication of low disciplinary control over the training of new generations of social workers" (p. 357). Consequently, the author affirms that "Social Work appears as a profession that is disciplinarily blurred" (p.358).

To reverse this trend, the disciplinary knowledge generated in the academy needs to be developed. The university is the central region for scientific disciplines and practical professions:

It will be the concrete and specifically protected social space from which the truest discourse is enunciated in defense of the dominant codes of practice, i.e. the codes favoured by those social agents who wield sufficient power or influence to gain acceptance (Larson, 1990, p. 216).

The university is the organization that generates the largest number of professionals (Larson, 1977). Therefore, it is the socializing agent of the professions and the one that has the condition to shape and model the professionals in the first place.

4. Deprofessionalization through the practice of the expert role

Taking up Iturrieta's first point, Gambrill (2001) argues that 'Social Work is not a knowledge-based profession, but an authority-based profession, which manifests itself in a variety of omissions, stratagems and commissions' (p. 167). Gambrill criticizes the insincerity of professionals who sometimes violate their ethical duty in the name of obedience to their duty to help. Examples he gives include paternalistic behavior, creating clients dependent on their help and the withholding of information, among others. Gambrill sees this as a missed opportunity, as criticism is essential for the growth of a profession.

Illich (1977) questions Social Work when it does not reinforce the autonomy of the person and makes him/her dependent on the social protection system. The author defines Social Work as a disabling profession when it is practiced in this way. Illich's thought is linked to humanism and with the freedom of the person, and in this way he argues that "informed choice requires the revision of the category of profession in our time" (1977b, p.17). He considers the middle years of the 20th century to be *Age of the disabling[3] professions*". The following contributions can be highlighted: 1) a one-sided definition of remedy, 2) unilateral definition of remedy, 3) incomprehensible language and 4) transformation of the citizen into an obligated customer. In this way of thinking, people have problems and experts have solutions. McKnight (1977) illustrates this idea when he says:

Since *you* are the problem, it is assumed that I, the professional service provider, *am the answer*. *You* are not the answer. *Your peers* are not the answer. *The political, social and economic environment* is not the answer. Nor is it possible that there is no answer. I, the professional, am the answer. The central assumption is that service is a one-way process. I, the professional, produce. You, the client, consume" (p. 83)[4] .

In this way a climate of illusion of omniscience and professional omnipotence is created, socially accepted and reproduced. Moreover, politics relies on technocracy and citizens on meritocracy, on legislation and on the satisfaction of needs, respectively. A market is created, legally legitimized, where citizens must necessarily

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[2] Social Work has not delimited any reserved area of activity, but if it were to have one, there is a broad consensus that it would be social reporting.

[3] It has been translated as disabling or disqualifying.

[4] The italics are the author's.

turn to professionals to satisfy their needs, necessarily turning them into consumers. Consequently, the professional elite defines needs and policy lines impoverish participatory democracy, since:

> The disabling function of unilateral professional help lies in the hidden assumption: "you will do better because I, the professional, know best what is good for you". The political implications of this assumption are at the heart of undemocratic systems. Indeed, societies that rely on one-sided professional service economies may be systematically grooming people to accept undemocratic bosses who take advantage of the dependency created by expert service providers. The latter teach the people: you will do better because we, the professional servants, know best what is good for you (McKnight, 1977, pp. 83-84).
> When the ability to define the problem becomes a professional prerogative, citizens cease to exist. That prerogative prevents the citizen from defining his problems, let alone solving them. It translates political functions into technical and technological problems (McKnight, 1977, p. 85).

Illich qualifies the new modern professions as "dominant, authoritarian, monopolistic and legalized" (1977a, p.19). These professions arise from the transformation of the liberal professions and are the ones that determine the needs and prescribe the solutions, since "the power resides in the prescription, based on the professional, sapiential, moral and charismatic authority" (pp. 17-18). This indetermination of the person in his or her self-prescription is the basis for the disqualifying and depersonalizing professional practice, since one intervenes without the other.

To reduce the impact of this element, Social Work must be connected to ethics and deontology, it must be exercised from the role of a reflective professional (Schön, 1998), it must trust in the capacity for perfectibility of human beings in the resolution of their difficulties (Kfouri, 1965) and, without forgetting, that the practice must be based on a methodology and a collaborative-relational diagnosis (Cardona-Cardona, Campos-Vidal, 2018; Cardona-Cardona, Cuartero-Castañer and Campos-Vidal, 2017).

5. Deprofessionalization due to subordination to the political-mercantile institution

With respect to the professional exercise of the Social Work, Illich observes that the social workers constitute a control group of the social performance applied to the citizen-client logic; thus he will say that "the social workers obtain the legal power to create the necessity that, by law, only they are authorized to satisfy" (1977a, p. 16). Illich chooses to stop "favoring a new or radical professionalism, encouraging a skeptical attitude towards experts, especially when they dare to diagnose and prescribe" (1977a, p. 14). The concept of need is created by the professional group and not defined by the people who find themselves in the circumstance of poverty and Illich will say that "social workers learned to standardize needs (...) and poverty was modernized. The poor became the needy" (1977a, pp. 22-23). This ensures a client and an active system of service consumption, under professional domination.

The author points out that, in this way, the system legitimizes itself, since, by creating the needy, they need social workers. Consequently, when needs-problems become multidisciplinary, a multi-professional solution is required, which justifies the practice of the professions. This reflection by the author connects with the perpetual maintenance of problem situations, which justify professional action, chronifying the problem-solution cycle (Gómez García, 2012; Rodríguez, 2008a).

The risks of deprofessionalization are greater in professions that have followed a model of professionalism closer to the state than self-governance (liberal profession), as is the case of Social Work in Spain (Kuhlmann, 2015). Therefore, the literature identifies how the free exercise of the profession encourages the professionalization of a profession, since the professional is not so much beholden to the institutional mandate as to the deontological one.

To summarize, from the above definitions and delimitations, the constituent elements of the deprofessionalizing process of Social Work can be extracted. These elements are presented separately as analytical categories to facilitate their understanding, but in reality, they occur dialectically.

Table 3. Relationship between the elements of deprofessionalization and social intervention.

			Causes	Consequences		
ECONOMIC RATIONALISATION	CONTROL OF SOCIAL SPENDING	COMMODIFICATION	Bureaucratization.	Social Work		
			Routinisation.			
			Fragmentation.	LESS CREATIVE	LESS REFLECTIVE	LESS PERSONALISED
			Standardisation.			
			Information management systems technology.			
			Underemployment.			
			Deregulation.			
			Paraprofessionals.			
			Weak disciplinary monopoly.			
			Blurred social image.			

Source: Own elaboration.

As can be seen, through deprofessionalization, "the body of specialized knowledge that monopolistically controls the profession is called into question" (Randall & Kindiak, 2008, p. 344). The key to expert knowledge lies in its being considered scarce, and scarcity attributes value and power in its performance to the possessor. Larson (1990) illustrates the importance that underlies this category when he states that:

> The modern state and capitalist enterprise use the expert information needed to govern society or to control production and markets. We are not talking about information that is available to anyone, but about "reserved" information, i.e. information that is kept secret and evades democratic control (p. 215).

6. Proletarianization through the thesis of deprofessionalization

Proletarianization and deprofessionalization are interrelated and interdependent phenomena which, although they are best illustrated separately, in reality they are juxtaposed and cannot be understood without each other.

With the French Revolution, but above all with the Industrial Revolution, the professions in the modern sense, occupied by the middle classes, emerged (Larson, 1977). In this context, and starting as mentioned above from neomarxist thought, the thesis of the proletarianization of the professions can be understood.

The emergence of market professions is accompanied by their proletarianization. The phenomenon of proletarianization is characterized by: a) massification (surplus labour), b) integration of the class struggle (as the profession is subrogated to the institution), c) concentration of labour (in services or institutions, which are offered as products to the market; as a consequence, free exercise is reduced) and d) salarization (sale of labour power in exchange for a wage) (Lacalle, 1976).

According to the proletarianization thesis, professionals obey the ideological apparatus of the institution through the salaried nature of their work and reproduce the prevailing capitalist model. Citing Rodrigues (2002), Krmpotic (2009) reflects that:

> This interpretation supports the idea that professionals become a new proletariat, since salarization would imply the loss of certain privileges and their approximation – in terms of attitudes, values and behaviour – to the world of the workers. Thus, an increase in the dependency relationship (and a decrease in liberal activity) would result in technical proletarianization – with the loss of control over the work process – and ideological proletarianization in the expropriation of the value of the product of labour (p. 7).

Guillén (1990), citing Larson, notes that the classical professions (medicine, law and the priesthood) already fulfilled the reproductive function of the structure of social inequality, since "the first ones assisted the elites and the second two assisted the poor", referring to the new professions occupied by the middle classes (p. 36).

Also, the proletarianization thesis demonstrates how capital is gaining control over the autonomy of the professions in the face of the increasing sophistication of technology in service delivery and the rising cost of providing professional services. This latter reason results in the rationalization and restructuring of services, with efforts to control the cost of care, and a trend towards privatization (Randall & Kindiak, 2008). Proletarianization means disqualification from work tasks and loss of professional autonomy (Dressel, Walters, Sweat, Clayton Jr & Chandler-Clayton, 1988).

Moreover, the proletarianization of the professions has a significant relationship with their bureaucratization. According to Guillén (1990), proletarianization constitutes the last stage of bureaucratization and implies the loss of control and subordination to the canons set by the organization. Bureaucratization is a consequence of the division of labour, the routinization of knowledge and the transfer of authority from professionals to hierarchical superiors (Borgatta & Montgomery, 2000). This division can result in the fragmentation of complex processes into simple tasks that can be carried out by unqualified people, as discussed in the previous sections.

Larson (1977) points out that the expansion of the state has been the most important factor in the bureaucratization of the professions. Therefore, professionals who develop their activity in bureaucratized organizations, carrying out routine work, become proletarianized "because they no longer possess the means of production and sell their labour force (their knowledge) to the owners of capital" (Rodríguez, 2008b, p. 55). Proletarianization by bureaucratization is most noticeable in the case of civil servants (Elliott, 1975).

The expansion of the state in European countries includes the exercise of certain professions in its apparatus, especially in the service sector. As a result, some professions will be almost exclusively linked to paid employment and will be more sensitive to the phenomena of proletarianization and bureaucratization. Excessive bureaucratization in the public sector led Titmuss "to call social workers the workers of the state" (1974, quoted in Herrera, 2001, p. 85), since proletarianization maintains social control and reproduces the dominant model, which distorts the original essence of the profession of emancipation of individuals and social transformation.

González (1960) shows that the process of bureaucratization has transformed the liberal professions by reducing their autonomy (or independence, to use his terminology). He defines liberal profession as:

> A group peculiar to the middle classes, possessing a high social status and a high level of technical preparation, endowed with a strong group consciousness and having three main characteristics: a) technical autonomy, b) professional organization and c) professional independence (pp. 149-150).
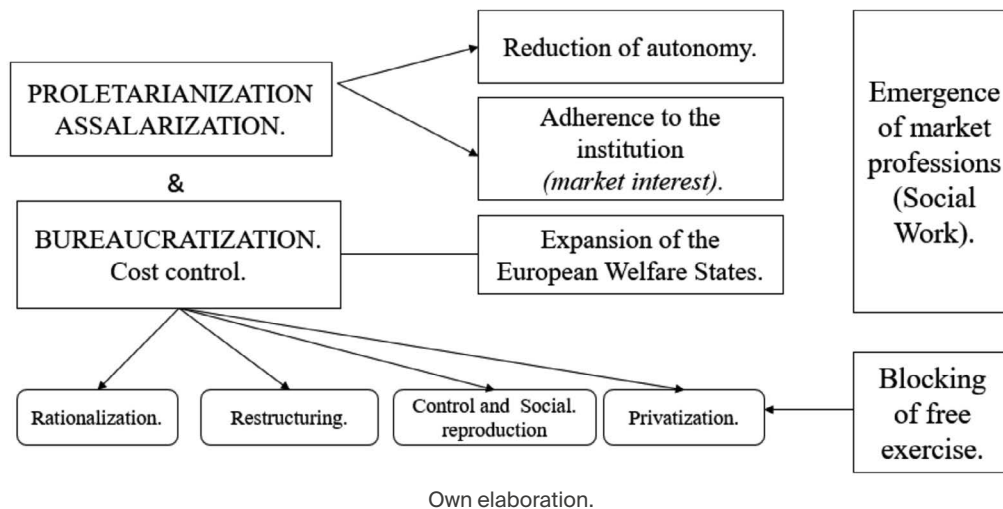
However:

> The present situation has arisen, in which the world of professionals has largely become a bureaucratized world, lacking in independence and, therefore, not everyone who exercises a profession requiring a university degree or similar, as was the case at the beginning of the century, can be codified as a "liberal profession", but only those who engage in the free exercise of this activity (p. 151).

González argues that the process of bureaucratization affects new and technical university degrees to a greater extent, making it difficult for the free exercise of the profession (as is the case of Social Work). Factors such as malpractice and the oversupply of professionals, among others, also justify the existence of more salaried than liberal professionals (Guillén, 1990).

It can be concluded that the most immediate consequence of proletarianization is the loss of professional autonomy and thus dependence on hierarchical organization. Autonomy, according to Friedson (1978), was the key to the acquisition of professional status. In addition, proletarianization entails other phenomena such as privatization, rationalization and restructuring of work. These ideas are illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 1. The process of proletarianization of the professions in relation to the process of bureaucratization.

Own elaboration.

It should be noted that the theories of deprofessionalization and proletarianization lack empirical evidence (Guillén, 1990) and over the years they have been put aside as theoretical elements. However, these theses are evidence of the transformations to which the professions are subjected, and which in some cases have led to their disappearance, adaptation or reinvention. They do not so much predict their extinction, but they do warn of the risks to which they may be subjected. Martín-Moreno and De Miguel (1982) state that "one should not be under the illusion that [the professions] are going to disappear; it is reasonable to think that some of the defining elements of the model are being eroded and are undergoing substantial changes" (p. 156). In this regard, Randall and Kindiak (2008) note:

> There is no doubt that both professionalization and proletarianization have put all professions under significant pressure in recent years. However, despite the relentless assault the professions have faced through rapid growth in technology and bureaucratic control, what is more remarkable is the resilience of those professions and their abilities to resist professional decline (p. 345).

7. Theoretical-practical lines that reinforce the professionalization of Social Work: Postprofessionalization and reprofessionalization and the civic paradigm in Social Work

It would be very naïve to think that, given the perspective described above, Social Work would disappear as "the future prospects for Social Work are not as bleak as one might think after a review of the literature" (Randall & Kindiak, 2008, p. 352). The deprofessionalization thesis is useful to explain the current state of the profession, to reveal implicit and inadvertent links and to anticipate alternative futures (Krmpotic, 2009) and, moreover, "is a major threat to high quality Social Work practice" (Healy & Meagher, 2004, p. 243); the desirable thing is to always strive for excellence (Ahmed, 2008; Morales Aguilera, 2015).

Firstly, as a counterpart to the situation of Social Work's malaise, through the thesis of deprofessionalization, other concepts emerge that counteract it, such as postprofessionalization and reprofessionalization.

Randall and Kindiak (2008) define the concept of postprofessionalization as the opening up of new fields of practice for the profession, creating new professional roles through the extension of practice[5] (encompassing

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[5]   Abbott (1988) already pointed out that professions are built in a system in constant competition towards the closure of a monopoly of functions.

new, diffuse fields and in relation to other professions). This last option constitutes a certain option for Social Work, given the multitude of functions and fields of expansion of Social Work, initiating a phase subsequent to the acquisition of the status of profession and/or specialization. In Spain, the free practice of the profession is a clear example of this model of development of the professionalization of Social Work.

Harington & Beddoe (2014) observe how, in the face of deprofessionalization, examples of reform in the professionalization of social workers emerge as alternatives to the classic processes. The authors argue that between *deprofessionalization* and *reprofessionalization* there is a substantial conceptual change, where the former (de) mobilizes towards the latter (re). By reprofessionalization, Healy and Meagher (2004) refer, on the one hand, to the improvement of their training and, on the other hand, to the reinforcement of the profession by collective action. Regarding empowerment, the authors understand that social workers need to have "the capacity to enact their work as a reflective, analytical and creative activity, and that these capacities are, or should be, recognized and supported in human organizations" (p. 243). Bureaucratic organizations discourage creativity, subsuming professional work to routinization and replication of fragmented tasks. In reference to collective action, the work developed by professional Social Work associations, especially professional associations, has been decisive for the establishment of the profession in society, in the sense of specific and monopolistic occupational closure provided by Larson (1977). However, professionalization by way of occupational closure brings with it the risk of not conquering new niches for professional practice (vetoing the option of growth by way of postprofessionalization).

Healy and Meagher (2004) consider it necessary to advance collective action through the development of professional unionism in order to protect professionals from precarious working conditions and to improve their recognition and social prestige. The authors analyse that in Social Work this has not been possible for the following reasons (pp. 251-253): the excessive diversity of work areas which means that social workers are affiliated to different generalist and majority trade unions, which is an obstacle to the defense of the common interests of the collective as a profession; social discrimination due to the link between Social Work and gender and care work; the reluctance to participate in opposition tactics such as strikes and picketing; the mission of trade unions which has been limited to collective bargaining and not to the defense of interests that go beyond the professional sub-groups that make them up; and public disaffection with trade unions, the drop in membership numbers and their financial dependence. This contribution by the authors reinforces the professionalization of trade unionism, realities that until now seemed to be mutually exclusive (Brill, 2001).

Postprofessionalization and reprofessionalization, together with other recommendations such as the training of reflective practitioners (Schön, 1998), systematization of practice to generate scientific and tacit knowledge, internationalization of knowledge and development of the hermeneutic paradigm, maintain the basic characteristics of professionalization, autonomy and self-regulation and contribute as a trend to the development of the profession in the true sense and thus to its social recognition and legitimization (O'Neill, 2001; Holosko & Leslie, 2001).

Secondly, the risks derived from the deprofessionalization thesis mobilize Social Work to reconceptualize its practice and move closer to the principles of social justice. Harington and Beddoe (2014) state that deprofessionalization opens an opportunity for Social Work to practice from a civic model, in engagement with the community. Under the civic paradigm, the social takes centre stage in Social Work. In the civic model of Social Work practice, professionals are agents on an equal footing with members of the community, in which everyone works as a team and both solutions and knowledge are co-constructed and shared. In this professional paradigm, personal and professional development are combined, which implies a drastic reduction of discomfort among social workers given the dissonance in terms of their identity and social identification. The following table shows the features of this model.

Table 4. Main features of the civic paradigm of Social Work

Civic paradigm of social work	
Type	New professional values in the occupational sector. Growth of NGO employment.
Power	The state finds credibility in professional work/practice; reconnects with communities; and is willing to work under local leadership on the need/problem.
Control	Joint monitoring with stakeholders.
Focus	Concern for civic revitalisation.
Origins	Community *practitioners* focus on improving civic outcomes. Outcomes are extended from participation in the funding of social services.
Profile	The profile is an expression of professional aspiration to enhance the integrity and diversity of civil society.
Field	The civic practitioner finds a place in the needs and aspirations of the community. The community is the field of practice.
Features	The occupational objective is shared; policy to build capacity, reduce barriers and strengthen identity.
Market control	Trade union activity to protect working conditions and professional activities to define fields and domains of practice.

Civic paradigm of social work	
Demand for services or expertise	Providing effective and appropriate responses in line with the social commitment to social justice and equality. Increasing employment in the new agencies that have emerged from policies that favour partnerships between government and civil society.
Status	Status based on respect for the community and its identity. Value to be found in the unity of participants to a common goal, the notion of public responsibility and community participation to change social circumstances.
Service ethos	Ethos: practice based on explicit statement of values and personal commitment to social change and justice. Strategic use of data on social patterns and underlying causalities / complexity. Evaluation to establish accuracy, strategy and effectiveness. Strict regular pattern on the use of funds.
Governance	External regulation may limit membership or the quality of work in the field of practice. Governance with powers to develop the occupational domain. The growth of informal initiatives for national or local collectives of existing like-minded practitioners (e.g. for youth work, community work, advocacy, etc.) but at an emerging stage and lacking critical influence.
Income	Wages for short-term contracts are increasing.
Careers	Career as a personal project, professional development structured to meet one's own aspirations, and which may coincide with the aspirations of the organization.
Members	Based almost entirely on local capacity for recruitment and selection of job applications. Short-term contracts in life-limited social programmes. Limited autonomy. Membership is made up of social policy programmes and political mandates.

Source: Harintong & Beddoe (2014, p. 154, pp. 156-157).

Underlying all the elements described above is an evocation of integrity and ethics. This is an element that is essential to "being a good professional" (Salcedo, 2015) as autonomy for "being a professional". It is necessary to remember how the community is always present as a space for professional intervention and connects it with a more civic professional practice (Pastor, 2015).

8. Final considerations

The profession of Social Work is a profession in constant evolution. However, since its introduction in Spain, it has grown both quantitatively and qualitatively, so that is not possible to speak of a decline. As with other professions, there are endogenous and exogenous factors that undermine professional autonomy, disqualify, dequalify and decapitalize the profession itself. Deprofessionalization is a risk for the professions, and therefore for the profession of Social Work. It is therefore important to be aware of the factors involved in this process and to take corrective action. This will reduce the discomfort felt by professionals and reinforce a successful practice that aims for excellence. The literature review identifies three options: 1) postprofessionalization – accession and improvement of new professional fields; 2) reprofessionalization – synergy of internal cohesion in the professional collective; and 3) reinforcement of the civic paradigm – connecting with the other as a subject with transformative power. Namely:

In the first case, Social Work needs to expand into new fields of the helping relationships, specialize and make visible the good practices that are being carried out in areas such as health, clinical, socio-educational, on-line, sport, business, emergency and others that are emerging far removed from the traditional role of service provider and closer to the self-realization of the human being. Free practice is a growing commitment that values professional autonomy, from the professional mandate (methodological and deontological) as opposed to the institutional (bureaucratic management). This makes it possible to move away from the reductionist version of Social Work as a profession linked to scarcity, in general, and to the economy, in particular. In the second case, Social Work can be re-professionalized through education and training on the one hand, and reflection and self-criticism on the other. The collective action of the profession is a healthy space (of care). It allows for epistemological vigilance and social and/or professional demands. This is evidenced by the creation of professional associations, scientific societies, forums, and the proliferation of congresses, conferences and seminars. These venues encourage an analytical and creative attitude to intervention. In itself, the practice of Social Work, the methodological application to social cases, i.e. social intervention, goes beyond bureaucratic management. The professional must know how to intervene, not how to manage resources. The professional must first mobilize the person's resources rather than institutional ones. It is necessary to create a return on practice through research by providing scientific evidence for the interventions that are carried out. Thirdly, the profession must be inspired by the civic paradigm of social justice and the social dimension of Social Work (from the recognition of the other to the community). It must move away from mere bureaucratic management and move towards actions that contribute to social cohesion, human development and pro-sociality. It implies an attitude linked to the teleological dimension and the social function of the profession, as a profession that enables the improvement of the relational and social situation of people to be improved, based on their personal autonomy and their capacity for perfectibility. If bureaucratization is due to the expansion of the state (Larson, 1990), the debureaucratization of Social Work must come from reinforcing its link with its own methodology and teleology (principles and values).

This makes it possible to consolidate professional autonomy in knowledge and know-how, as well as self-governance and self-regulation of the profession by its practitioners. Knowledge is a significant factor in the transition towards deprofessionalization and proletarianization, being the main source of power (Krmpotic, 2022).

Social workers ultimately have the capacity to modify their professional practice and to overcome mandates that are far removed from professional axioms, i.e. they can do what they must do. They have the immanent and legitimate power to exercise their professional autonomy in each and every case.

The theoretical elements regarding the deprofessionalization of Social Work outlined here serve as a warning and food for thought, rather than as evidence or affirmation of its existence. It is necessary to be aware of the current risks, and more importantly, of the consequences of the stabilization of this type of practice and of the socialization of the new generations in it, if we want to continue to practice Social Work that is connected to its essence.

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