

## CREDENTIALISM

Credentialism, as a social phenomenon, refers to reliance upon formal credentials conferred by educational institutions, professional organizations, and other associations as a principal means to determine the qualifications of individuals to perform a range of particular occupational tasks or to make authoritative statements as "experts" in specific subject areas. As an ideology, it reflects the ostensibly meritocratic idea that positions within the occupational structure ought to be filled by those who have obtained their qualifications through institutional mechanisms (e.g., training and education within certified schools; successful completion of formal examinations) culminating in the attainment of degrees, diplomas, or certificates. As a social-scientific concept, it is closely associated with the discourses of the sociologies of education and work.

Historically, the concept of credentialism emerged as part of the critique of professionalism and in the service of the "deschooling movement" of the 1960s and 1970s. Radical critics of professional education, such as Ivan Illich (1971), proceeded from the assumption that most if not all of the skills needed to competently perform the work tasks carried out by many professionals could be acquired through practical experience and with much less in the way of formal schooling than is usually needed to obtain the "required" credentials. From this perspective, the disguised purpose of much formal schooling (its "hidden curriculum") is to impart a particular disciplinary paradigm, ideological orientation, or set of values to those seeking formal credentials to work in prestigious or "high-status" fields such as medicine, law, and education. Furthermore, the credential systems developed in a number of occupational areas are part of the "collective mobility projects" of practitioners to achieve a "professional status" that brings with it greater material and symbolic rewards. Thus credentialism is closely associated with strategies of "social closure" (to use Max Weber's expression) that permit social groups to maximize rewards "by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles" (Parkin 1979, p. 44).

The pursuit of credentials through bureaucratized, institutional channels constitutes a kind of "rite of passage" for those who aspire to socially privileged positions while also allowing established professional or occupational groups to control the supply of practitioners, to regulate their activities, and to maintain a monopoly of legitimacy in the provision of particular services. The credential system also legitimates the establishment of legal restrictions by the state in concert with professional, occupational, or skilled trades associations concerning who is deemed qualified to perform particular tasks or provide specific services. One example has been the legal barriers that have been put into place in many jurisdictions to prevent midwives from providing birthing services to expectant mothers, thereby ensuring that such services will remain the exclusive preserve of medical doctors.

The "credential inflation" that occurred over the last third of the twentieth century was a product of the tremendous expansion in postsecondary education that occurred in many of the more developed industrial or "postindustrial" societies in the post-World War II (1939-1945) era. Jobs previously filled by people possessing only high-school diplomas (for example, insurance salespeople) were increasingly filled by those with college diplomas or undergraduate university degrees. The proliferation of employment opportunities in the "service sector" combined with the contraction of the manufacturing labor force increased labor market competition for "white-collar" jobs requiring reasonably high levels of literacy or numeracy. However, many if not most of these jobs did not require as many specific skill sets as the blue-collar jobs that they displaced. It is therefore arguable whether the shift from a predominantly manufacturing to a "service" or even "knowledge-based" economy has brought with it the imperative of higher levels of formal educational attainment for the mass of the labor force. Even so, the members of this labor force have felt compelled to pursue higher levels of education (as symbolized by college diplomas and university degrees) to avoid relegation to employment in the vast array of poorly paid and menial jobs that characterize the so-called "postindustrial" economy. In this context, a college diploma or undergraduate university degree is not so much a ticket to "success" as a safeguard against migration into the most undesirable regions of the labor market. The corollary to this phenomenon is that many workers regard themselves as overqualified for the jobs they perform and experience workplace dissatisfaction stemming from the perception that many of the intellectual skills they attained through "higher education" are being underutilized or even wasted.

With the advent of globalization and the increased mobility of professionals and workers of all kinds across

national boundaries, the problem of recognizing "credentials" obtained in other countries has come to the fore. On the one hand, professional organizations and other occupational associations are concerned that the influx of such credentialed individuals may weaken their control over the supply of "qualified" labor; on the other hand, governments are under pressure to recognize such "foreign credentials" by a public that is anxious to alleviate a real or perceived scarcity of professional service providers in such areas as medicine and law.

For most of its critics, credentialism is fundamentally a set of practices and an ideology associated with the reproduction of structures of social inequality and the intergenerational perpetuation of class and status distinctions. For its defenders, it is an inevitable concomitant of a rationalized occupational division of labor, necessary to maintaining optimal levels of productivity and performance. There are clearly elements of truth in both positions, but their satisfactory articulation requires recognition of the ways in which class, race, gender, and citizenship shape both occupational and opportunity structures in contemporary societies and of how credentialism conceals and obscures this reality behind a rationale of technical necessity.

SEE ALSO *Division of Labor; Education, USA; Globalization, Social and Economic Aspects of; Hierarchy; Human Capital; Knowledge Society; Managerial Class; Merit; Meritocracy; Productivity; Professionalization; Stratification; University, The*

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