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Professions and their expertise: Charting the spaces of 'elite' occupations

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Abstract
This paper argues for a sustained study of knowledge-intensive or liberal professions in geography. I review existing work in political geography and related fields to identify a gap in the study of knowledge-intensive professions, especially those that are popularly associated with elites. I draw from sociology, anthropology, and international relations to explain why we need to better understand such professions. By the geographical study of professions and their expertise I mean the examination of the places, spatial networks, and travels of ideas that shape these professions and the expertise created therein.

Keywords
diplomacy, elites, expertise, institutions, intellectuals, law, professions

I Introduction: 'We cry together'

In September 2018, Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell was asked by his fellow former Member of European Parliament Daniel Cohn-Bendit what normally happens at the Foreign Affairs Council, a formalized institutional setting in which European Union (EU) foreign ministers meet monthly to make EU-level decisions about the union's external action. 'Hah!', Borrell said: 'For me it's a sort of . . . we cry together . . . We cry together at the unhappiness of the world. It's a sort of display of the world's problems'. What do they ever manage to get done, his interviewer enquired. 'We manage to cry,' Borrell repeated. 'We manage to regret. We manage to issue condemnations. We manage to mobilize humanitarian aid resources. We bandage wounds' (Eder, 2018).

The disillusionment and sarcasm in that comment give me pause, as I would expect something more platitudinous from a foreign minister. The vignette thus piques my curiosity about the flux of conformist and critical sensibilities in bureaucratic institutions, especially those that are widely perceived – and with some justification – as privileged and smug. One lesson from the political upheavals in the United States and Europe since 2016 is that such institutions and the expertise generated therein matter both despite their inertia *and* because of it. Some of the most obdurate resistance to the excesses of the Trump administration or the Conservative majority in the House of Commons has come from the civil service – from the very professionals whom critical geographers like me tend to discount as

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merely the servants of states. A number of the international crises of our time, including the United States pull-out from the Paris climate agreement and the Iran nuclear agreement, the multiplying trade disputes, or Brexit, derive some of their destructive energy from undercutting the professional expertise of civil servants. That expertise is codified and validated in part by the professions, such as diplomacy, law, or economics, in which many civil servants are trained. Michael Gove, the pro-Brexit British politician who famously quipped in 2016 that 'people in this country have had enough of experts' illustrates this. What Gove had meant to say, he later clarified, was that economics as a site of expertise was 'a profession in crisis' (quoted in Eyal, 2019: 1). We are witnessing, American journalist Christopher Leonard (2019: 2) says in the context of his country, a 'broad-spectrum effort to hobble, dismantle and cripple the administrative state so it cannot enforce the rules'. When it comes to diplomacy, the crippling involves more than dismissing some advice or defunding some programs: it also involves the systematic undercutting of the professional autonomy and expertise of the diplomatic profession. We thus need to understand the role of professions and the expertise generated therein in both fostering and stalling change.

This paper does not attempt to explain Borrell's observation: it rather advocates a more explicit and sustained study of the professional context in which it arises. The remark illustrates the grind of frustrating non-decisions, unsatisfying half-solutions, and barely palatable compromises that permeate that context. The professional speaking – Josep Borrell – is at one level just one data point. At another level, his example may be more significant than first meets the eye: slightly over a year after Borrell made these comments, he became, from 1 December 2019, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the European Union's top diplomat.

As a review article, this paper draws mostly on existing scholarship. Blending political geography with the sociological and anthropological work on professions, expertise, and elites, I clarify terminology, highlight potential synergies among these literatures, and chart interdisciplinary paths to a richer understanding of policy-making institutions and expertise. The geographical study of knowledge-intensive professions here means the analysis of the places, spatial networks, and travels of ideas that shape such professions and the knowledge generated therein. Although many of my examples cite diplomacy, my core argument is about the production of professional expertise. Expertise is linked not only to institutions but also to the professions that produce, codify, and validate it: a more nuanced understanding of its production requires sustained attention to professions in addition to institutions. It necessitates that we examine the social formations and systems of agency that are both located in and constitutive of institutions.[1]

Today's human geography is concerned more with the every-person than the high-ranking official. This is partly a reaction against geography's well-documented service to the imperial and militaristic projects of nation-states. When it comes to meetings like the Foreign Affairs Council, political geographers write about the on-the-ground effects of the decisions taken (or not) therein. They also write about the geographical imaginaries that propel and legitimize these decisions much before and after the meetings are convened and adjourned. The meetings themselves are left largely to international relations (IR) scholars. We consequently know relatively little about the daily geographies of places like high or federal courts, foreign ministries, or international regulatory bodies. Most of what we know is coached in big-picture terms of processes, dynamics and frameworks – social structures in general. Alternatively, geographers focus on micro-level processes – on individuals. The

study of professions would add a meso-level theorizing to consider the individual and collective actors whose political agency (capacity to act) is constituted in the context of particular professional norms and struggles. It would enable us to better illuminate 'the strange uncertainty of modern managerial reason, the disenchantment and doubled consciousness of its practitioners', the alchemy of confidence and ambivalence that is 'sustained by a strange collective faith in a practice they . . . [understand] . . . to rest on hodgepodge' (Kennedy, 2016: 286).

The rest of the argument proceeds in three steps. The next two sections review the relevant work in geography and related fields to lay out what we, as geographers, know about professions as sites of expertise and what new insights we can gain from other strands of social science scholarship. The second section looks at research outside geography whereas the third section concentrates on political geography and closely related fields. The fourth section brings examples from diplomacy to illustrate the import of studying such 'elite' professions. The conclusion lays out a starting point – a preliminary sketch more than a detailed map – for a geographical study of professions. Such a study, an addition to and not a substitute for the analysis of ideas, individuals, and institutions, would advance our understanding of bureaucratized power and expert knowledge.

II What are professions and why they matter

I Professionals and specific intellectuals

The first problem in the study of professions and the expertise generated therein concerns terminology. In everyday use, the term 'profession' is associated simply with professionalism and professional qualifications, especially in white-collar occupations. To speak of professions is, loosely, to speak of middle-class work. The term 'profession' seems to have little analytical value added (Dent et al., 2016: 1). In parallel, there exists a delimited set of occupations, such as law, medicine, or accounting, with highly specific – usually nation-specific – forms of accreditation and regulation, that are seen as professions in a narrow sense. To complicate matters further, the term 'profession' as it is used in English-language social science has specifically Anglo-American connotations and there are no simple synonyms to it in continental sociology (Sciulli, 2005: 920–1; see also Sciulli, 2009). For simplicity and clarity, I follow many sociologists to chart a middle course between the informal and the formal understandings of the term. By professions I mean, following sociologist Keith Macdonald (1995: 1), 'the occupations based on advanced, or complex, or esoteric, or arcane knowledge'. This seems vague, but at least it does not get bogged down in questions about whether professions need formal state-sponsored certification or what kinds of networks count in the study of them. The above definition is practical also because formal legal definitions are not necessarily crisper. According to European Union law, 'liberal professions' are, 'those practised on the basis of relevant professional qualifications in a personal, responsible and professionally independent capacity by those providing intellectual and conceptual services in the interest of the client and the public' (Official Journal of the European Union, 2005: 6).[2]

These definitions indicate that 'advanced', 'complex', or 'conceptual' knowledge, as well as a certain degree of professional autonomy, are integral to the object of study. Hence my use of the term knowledge-intensive or liberal professions, or what Sciulli (2005) calls 'expert occupations': to denote professions based on highly specialized, conceptual, and abstract (as well as high-status) knowledge. I am interested in how these professions work and how they matter rather than how they should be defined. As Dent et al. (2016: 6) note in their introduction to a broad edited volume on the relevant

sociological work, 'professions and professionalism are not fixed concepts but reflect a fluid set of institutional arrangements'. Terminological ambiguity is a prominent feature of such work: some sociologists indeed use the term professional power or simply expertise, rather than profession, to analyze the exercise of power in and by professions (Eyal and Pok, 2015). As Gil Eyal (2019: 13–14) points out, the term 'expertise' has in some ways supplanted the term 'profession', which is treated as a narrower category, linked to particular occupations and qualifications. The sociologists of expertise, too, use the term 'profession' when they focus on the actual daily production of expert knowledge and expert authority (see Eyal, 2019: 70).

What the authors share is the recognition that the object of study includes something more than ideas or individuals: that it encompasses some kind of shared social space in which professional knowledge is created and codified. Robert Evans (2015: 19), for example, defines expertise as 'the property of a social collective [that is] both preserved and refreshed by the members of that group'. Expertise is not a free-floating substance: before any claim comes to function as expert, it is codified as such by formal or informal professional associations or alliances. Sociologists also note the multiple scales and modes in which professional expertise is generated. Although the scale is often national given that certifications are that, the spaces of expertise cannot be mapped neatly in national terms (Bockman, 2011; Fourcade, 2009; Eyal and Pok, 2015). The key questions are about the 'how' of work process rather than the 'what' of formal definitions around jurisdiction and certification. It is precisely their mobile fluidity that makes knowledge-intensive professions important for geographical investigation. Studying such professions enables us to keep the embodied character of expertise – knowledge linked to individuals as well as collectives – on the foreground of the investigation.

The persons who inhabit knowledge-intensive professions are policy-making officials rather than 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980): they devise policies rather than implement them. In international and transnational bodies, most officials fall under this description: these officials do not interface with the public because the regulations they produce are implemented through the institutions of nation-states. In the European Commission, for example, the permanent civil servants working on policy proposals are in the grades of AD or 'policy-making administrators': they make policies about national administration and those policies are implemented by national civil servants. In such institutions, all formal knowledge is 'abstract', 'esoteric' or 'arcane' (Macdonald, 1995: 1) as much of it works with national laws rather than street-level social realities. The 'street level' of such bureaucracies is the civil services of nation-states. A similar point can be made about diplomats: most of their work involves coordination with other (domestic and foreign) bureaucracies. Conceptually, methodologically, and ethically, this is the realm of 'studying up' as it requires engagement with institutions that are better funded and more prestigious than academia. These institutions are particularly obscure for researchers and the general public and they still tend to remain 'in the shadow' (Gusterson, 1997) in social science research.

A great deal of contemporary scholarship on the production of expertise, in fields ranging from actor-network theory and assemblage studies to the work on subject-production, is indebted to Foucaultian conceptions of power and agency (Collins and Evans, 2007; Rose, 2018; Mitchell, 2012). For Foucault, professional practices in knowledge-intensive professions were a central concern. Most intellectual work today, he says, occurs not in the modality of the universal, 'but within specific sectors' and at the precise points where particular tasks situate the professionals charged with these

tasks: housing, the hospital, the asylum, the university, or the civil service (Foucault, 1984: 68). It is therefore 'quite possible', Foucault says, 'to do one's job as a psychiatrist, lawyer, engineer, or technician', and also 'carry on work that may properly be called intellectual, an essentially critical work' (quoted in McNeil, 2002: 162). Such professionals, the specific intellectuals in Foucault's terminology, are not merely 'competent instances in the service of the state or capital' (Foucault, 1984: 68). Rather, by virtue of their direct and localized relation to knowledge and institutions, specific intellectuals can and do make interventions in social and political processes (Barratt, 2003).

Unlike the universal intellectual who aspires to speak for everyone, the specific intellectual intervenes in the sector of life with which they are practically involved: hospitals, housing, delinquency, nuclear power, arms control. They are found in a variety of occupations: nurses, physicians, social workers, policy analysts and advisors of various kinds. The knowledge they develop is not something they simply 'apply' to the problems and conflicts with which they engage at work (Shriner, 1982: 383). Rather, these problems and conflicts are conceptualized in part on the basis of their knowledge. The specific intellectual brings into play 'his specific position in the order of knowledge'. 'One may even say', Foucault writes, 'that the role of the specific intellectual must become more and more important in proportion to the political responsibilities which he is obliged willy-nilly to accept, as a nuclear scientist, computer expert, pharmacologist, etc.' (Foucault, 1984: 69). To discount that intellectual as merely a servant of the state or capital, he adds, is analytically untenable and politically dangerous (1984: 72).

The concept of the specific intellectual underscores that meaningful political struggles do not stop at the entrances of secured office buildings. It enables Foucault and much of the research informed by his approach to focus on the diffuse mode of knowledge production that is simultaneously highly technical and politically consequential. Analyzing professionals as specific intellectuals casts these individuals unequivocally as political agents rather than acted-upon bureaucrats. As the boundaries between intelligentsia, civil service, and various mediating fields, such as think-tanks and the media, are becoming more permeable (Osborne, 2004), these actors' capacity to generate political interventions becomes more dispersed socially and geographically. The study of professions, as distinct from institutions, thus resonates with key themes in the broadly Foucaultian work on the apparatuses of modern power.

2 The 'glaring invisibility' of elites

The effort to bring the specific intellectuals of knowledge-intensive professions into clearer focus requires that we also engage with the renewed sociological work on elites. The adjective 'renewed' is important because elites were relatively invisible in the social sciences for several decades before the 2008–11 global financial crisis (Caletrio, 2012). There are multiple reasons for that 'glaring invisibility' (Savage and Williams, 2008: 2). Central among those is the power of elites: they have the resources to not mingle with researchers and not provide data to them. In addition, the Foucault-inspired interest in diffuse and mobile sociotechnical relations has turned scholars away from examining formally delimited groups, such as 'the elites'. Statistical analyses have meanwhile oriented academics toward larger groups, also away from small hard-to-define groups like elites. Speaking of 'elites' has a conspiratorial tone that many scholars wish to avoid. In recent decades, therefore, the political and academic usage of the term elite changed from agents of change playing strategic roles in social processes to traditional interest groups opposing progressive change. It became

fashionable to not be a member of the elite and not study them either. The irony, Paul Du Gay (2008: 81) notes, is that 'there is now a new breed of public sector elites, which, in keeping with equivalent elites in business and politics, denies its own elite status'. This self-effacing narrative is good business, Du Gay, continues, as 'you can get away with an awful lot if you can convince people that you don't actually exist'.

The analytical task is not to develop neat definitions of elites or to uphold traditional conceptions of 'old boys' clubs', 'inner circles', or 'the establishment'. It is rather to take seriously the flexibility and mobility of de facto elites (Savage and Williams, 2008: 15). Elite studies have thus moved from predominantly neo-Weberian (i.e. group-based) modes of analysis to a more diverse interdisciplinary field (Savage and Williams, 2008; Kauppi and Madsen, 2013; Wedel, 2017). Much of the new energy focuses on the mobile, dispersed, and geographically specific operation of elite networks regardless of simple designations of rank or status. Thus, anthropologist Janine Wedel (2017) invites us to consider a new type of influence elite rather than the traditional power elite. Whereas the study of power elites focuses on stable positions at the top of formal institutions, contemporary reality is more diffuse. In the United States, three-quarters of 'federal' employees now work directly for private entities (i.e. contract and grant employees, not federal employees) (Wedel, 2017: 157). Elsewhere, Wedel (2009) coins the term 'shadow elites' to capture the relative invisibility of transnational elites. She characterizes the members of such elites as 'cross-pollinating institutional nomads' (Wedel, 2017: 193) who are defined by '*how they operate*, rather than where they come from, the capital they have amassed, or the official position they occupy at a given time' (2017: 154, emphasis in original). Elite professions are more accurately described as professional fields in which power stems from linkages and networks rather than formal rank. They are characterized by 'fragmented governing space and more liquid, diverse, and decentered power structures' (Wedel, 2017). To rise in these fields, one needs high levels of network capital, derived from high levels of geographical mobility, extensive institutional contacts, and capacity to move across diverse institutional settings (Caletrio, 2012). The task is, in part, to discern and explain the operation of transnational power elites that operate 'in, around, and beyond a growing number of international institutions' (Kauppi and Madsen, 2013: 324). These elites are characterized by the relative interchangeability of their institutional positions, combined with the stable character of the elite groups themselves (2014: 328).

Elite studies thus shift the focus from stable formal positions and hierarchies to flux and flow in fragmented informal networks. They seek to develop 'a series of midlevel observations [. . .] for research into the role of expert conflict, knowledge and professional practice in the reproduction of an unjust world' (Kennedy, 2016: 2). They recognize that professionals in expert occupations are generally not motivated by abstract ideas of order or power: they usually pursue practical advantages 'of one or another sort for their ministry, their client, their political party, their profession, their faction or school of thought' (2016: 31). These professionals may speak about the world in terms of order and system, but they speak about their own work in terms of a terrain of struggle. Close-up, their world is not one of economic laws or legal principles but one of professional struggles (Kennedy, 2016: 2; see also Rhodes, 2011). What may appear a coherent system from afar is more often than not, to borrow John Griffith's description of the legal system, 'a rather unsystematic collage of inconsistent and overlapping parts, lending itself to no legal interpretation, morally and aesthetically offensive to the eye of the liberal idealist, and almost incomprehensible in its complexity to the would-be empirical student' (Griffiths, 1986: 4, quoted in Jeffrey,

2019a: 135). A 'cartographer' (Kennedy, 2016: 66) of that collage needs to begin with people rather than institutions to foreground the amorphous and piecemeal character of knowledge production. That researcher needs to be alert to their subjects' capacity for strategic self-interested action without losing sight of these professionals' ambivalence about and disenchantment with that action (2016: 277). 'Expert knowledge is human knowledge' (p. 277) and it needs to be studied as such.

Kennedy's remark resonates with Michel de Certeau's (1984: 115): 'Every story is a travel story: a spatial practice'. If professional expertise is a human story, it is also a spatial story: it has a geography of its own. Dispersed power does not unfold everywhere: dispersed processes, too, unfold in particular places. That geography is generally not drawn out by anthropologists, sociologists, or critical legal scholars. Wedel (2009, 2017), for example, identifies intensive and extensive spatial mobilities as a defining feature of the new elites and a resource they use to erase the traces of their own power. Her description indicates a complicated *geography* of the processes she describes, but her treatment of that geography does not go beyond a generic reference to 'nomadism'. When sociologists unpack the workings of particular professions, they refer to specific legal frameworks (e.g. taxation laws) but otherwise take the place to be a nation-state (but see Harrington, 2016; Stampnitzki, 2014). Critical legal scholars (e.g. Dezalay and Garth, 2011; Kennedy, 2016) rarely elaborate on how the 'cartography' (Kennedy, 2016: 66) they identify plays out on a daily basis. Sociologist Didier Bigo advocates the need to examine the 'centrifugal dynamics strong enough to enable a particular group of state officials to create their own transnational know-how and to treat *the transversal professional world they inhabit* as important as local or national worlds' (Bigo, 2016: 399, emphasis added). Bigo thus identifies transversal professional worlds as important objects of study, but he provides no empirical detail on how these worlds transverse states. Because such studies, innovative as they are in conceptual terms, seldom touch down anywhere for long, their insightful treatment of the question of 'what' tells us little about another question integral to the understanding the 'what' – the question of 'where'.

III The know-where of professional expertise

In geography, a substantial body of research argues that in order to understand the know-where (Agnew, 2007) of knowledge and power, we need to carefully situate institutions and the knowledge they produce in their place-specific contexts. That work alludes to, but does not generally flesh out, a certain degree of autonomy for individuals and professional norms in institutions. I thus argue that geographers have tackled the geographies of professions and professional expertise obliquely: a more explicit study is the logical next step.

In big-picture terms, it is well established that we need to think about political practice in terms of operational spaces rather than national territories or international borders (Sassen, 2018; see also Agnew, 2007; Barkan, 2013; Gilbert, 2018). Such operational spaces, in spheres such as finance, cross borders with considerable ease. They require national institutions to function, but they are not necessarily contained by national or international laws (Sassen, 2018: 7). In the long run, such operational spaces lead to the de facto transnationalization of national and inter-national institutions. Although international organizations are based on the primacy of nation-states, the practical necessity of elaborating collective rules and dispute-settlement mechanisms 'implies superseding national interests to construct a common mode of regulation' (Abeles and Rousseau, 2017: 66). In spheres like international trade, 'a political scene is drawn on a transnational scale, even

when institutions continue to function in their traditional diplomatic roles' (2017: 72; see also Dittmer, 2017). We are witnessing the transnationalization of bureaucratic practices and the agents of these practices (Häkli and Kallio, 2014; Kuus, 2018). This points to the need for meso-level enquiry into the specificities of the operational spaces identified by Sassen and others.

Geographic work tends to concentrate on social processes outside state institutions. Whereas a discipline like IR is still relatively institution-centered,[3] geographic research generally tries to synthesize arguments about structural or institutional processes with empirical material about the daily experiences of everyday people outside the state apparatus. Empirically, a great deal of that work, often informed by broadly Foucaultian conceptions of dispersed agency, focuses on the construction and legitimation of ideas and policy assemblages. It does not usually concentrate on any one institution or profession but it does offer insights into the instruments and spaces through which international financial, legal, or other standards are produced (e.g. Bachmann, 2016; Jeffrey, 2019a, 2019b; Clark, 2015; Peck, 2010). It intersects with a related body of work on the production of scientific and technical knowledge in complex organizational settings (e.g. Amoore, 2018; Barry, 2013; De Goede, 2012; Essex and Carmichael, 2016; Müller, 2012; Prince, 2019).[4] Taken together, these literatures illuminate the operation of specific policies or policy instruments. They emphasize volatile transnational networks that flatten formal hierarchies and hybridize forms of expertise (Peck, 2017: 5–6). They stress the co-production of ways of knowing and ways of governing, the imperative to closely examine the institutions that produce policy ideas, and the need to study organizations as processes of organizing (Kuus, 2020; Pallett and Chilvers, 2015). They also indicate that professionals have some room for maneuver – some autonomy – within organizations. Russell Prince (2019: 4) for example, speaks of 'the statistical enterprise' – the set of 'institutions, agencies, networks, texts, databases, and calculative devices that are populated by statistical experts and practitioners' – to highlight the co-constitution of all these phenomena. Alex Jeffrey (2019a: 2) speaks of the 'fundamental autonomy' of law as 'a closed system of knowledge and practice'. The task is, in part, to interrogate and analyze the production and effects of that autonomy. The scholarsa cited above say relatively little about the actual institutions in which this happens. We thus need to complement the burgeoning geographic work on policy instruments with a more explicit and sustained study of the professional norms and standards – the professional fields – that are central to the development and implementation of these instruments. Professions are social formations that interact with other social formations (see Jeffrey, 2019a: 180 regarding law).

The operation of professions as distinct from the institutions in which they are located matters: social realities do not entirely fit institutional frameworks. With the growing separation of control functions from street-level bureaucrats, the processes in headquarters cannot be read off of how they play out on the ground. We need to examine the knowledge-intensive professions, such as law, finance, or diplomacy, that are invisible from detention centers, warehouses, or border crossings.

In political geography, the occupation that has received some attention as a profession with its own culture and expertise is diplomacy. This is because of the specificity of diplomatic institutions and working cultures. Many studies begin the empirical sections with an explanation of that specificity. They discuss the ritualized character of diplomatic performance, they analyze the materiality of mundane diplomatic practice, and they include numerous quotes from practitioners to illustrate this (e.g. Dittmer, 2017; Jones and Clark, 2019; Kuus, 2019; McConnell, 2016). They thereby document the

existence of, and struggle over, professional norms. They also note the existence of transnational networks at the core of diplomatic practice. The national interest that diplomats are tasked to represent, Dittmer (2017: 4) points out, 'is an emergent product not only of the political elites charged with formulating it but of the specific networks of transnational circulation *in which those* elite*s are already embedded*' (emphasis added). Dittmer thereby draws attention to the transnational elite field – I would say profession – that underpins and enables diplomatic work.

Geographic research also indicates that the professional norms of diplomacy have not received sustained coverage to date. Dittmer and McConnell (2015: 1), for example, note that much has been said about how diplomats negotiate between cultures, but less so about the cultures of *diplomacy itself* (emphasis added). The existence of diplomatic culture, they continue, is tacitly taken for granted and it is therefore not studied (2015: 3). Yet professional diplomatic culture cannot be read off of the national cultures that the profession is tasked to mediate (2015: 5). In an institution, such as a foreign ministry, bureaucratic practice is based in part on the professional traditions of the profession, such as diplomacy, at the center of the institution. Given the growing interest in paradiplomacy by regions, cities, and other non-state actors, geographers need to examine more carefully the spaces of the diplomatic profession itself. When Dittmer and McConnell speak of diplomatic cultures, it is a small step from the geographies of cultures to the geographies of professions. Diplomatic studies scholars likewise recognize that the need for complex technical expertise, in matters that range from climate to cybersecurity, is transforming the boundary-making practices in diplomacy by shifting the principle of representation from territorially defined units to authority grounded in spatially more complex symbolic systems (2015: 6). The empirical study of the process is an inherently geographical task because diplomats represent and mediate places. The usual toolbox of terms does not 'give us a sufficient handle on situations of change and uncertainty' (McConnell, 2018: 141). When outsiders, such as governments-in-exile, mimic and rehearse state power, they strategically work with the norms and traditions of not the state in general but a specific profession – diplomacy. The task of meso-level theorizing is to focus not on the macro-level of 'the system' or the micro-level of individuals; it is to analyze the professional norms and fields that bind the system together and shape political agency in it.

IV The occupation that 'does not exist': Professional struggles in diplomacy

Diplomacy deserves a specifically geographical study as a knowledge-intensive profession because of what diplomats do and how they do it. In terms of the what, diplomatic knowledge is geographical knowledge: it brings places together to create inter-national and trans-national connections within and beyond the patchwork of states (Kuus, 2016). Diplomats are at the center of a group of professionals termed 'intellectuals of statecraft' that have been the empirical focus of a considerable share of critical geopolitics research (O Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). Because diplomacy is the principal integrative mechanism of international politics, knowledge production in that profession can tell us a great deal about the international system. In terms of the how, diplomacy has traditionally enjoyed a high level of autonomy within state structures. Today, as the profession is experiencing transprofessionalization (Constantinou et al., 2016) – a process that expands diplomatic space and intensifies the pace of global networks – mapping the specific geographies of that process is an important task.

This section underscores the relative autonomy of the diplomatic profession and the geographical character of the knowledge produced therein. The burgeoning geographical work on diplomacy was briefly reviewed earlier: this section highlights why that work needs to be extended toward studying diplomacy as a profession. My goal is not to provide an analysis of diplomacy, but to illustrate *why* geographers need to pay closer attention to knowledge-intensive professions more broadly.

The first practical difficulty in tackling the 'why' question in the case of the diplomatic profession is, once again, around definitions. 'We need to distinguish among three different images of diplomacy', an interviewee notes before answering my question about diplomatic skills.[5] The most visible of those is Diplomacy with a big 'D': the sphere of flashy summits and graceful ambassadorial residences in which, many people suspect, extravagant food and wine are savored at our expense. The environment that most diplomats actually inhabit most of the time is diplomacy with a small 'd': the professional sphere of discreet bureaucratic processes through which long-term negotiations are conducted and foreign policy messages are crafted as well as distributed. 'And then there is DIP-LO-MA-CY with all capital letters', my interlocutor adds with a twinkle and a gesture that mimics flashing lights accentuating each syllable: that is essentially a method of marketing everything from hotels and student exchanges to fake aristocratic titles. The study of professional diplomatic practice – the sphere of the small 'd' – is complicated by the persistent conflation of these three images, even among academics. As a diplomat, one practitioner of the trade (his term) observes, you do a job that, in the minds of many people, 'does not exist'. Diplomatic credentials are ambiguous by design. On the one hand, diplomacy is a clear-cut profession in terms of accreditation and location: diplomats are career foreign service officers working for a national ministry of foreign affairs. Diplomatic protocol is tightly regulated internationally. On the other hand, far from everyone with diplomatic accreditation is a professional diplomat. In everyday language and on formal business cards, a diplomat is often simply a person who represents their country abroad. To be a diplomat in that sense does not denote a member of a profession, occupation, or trade.

Diplomacy exemplifies a profession that mixes the work of specific intellectuals (in Foucault's terminology) with the broader (and loaded) term of 'elite'. Historically, the 'elite' part is more visible as 'social closure and elitism' were the norm in recruitment and promotion until well into the second half of the 20th century (Constantinou et al., 2016: 22). To this day, even marginalized diplomats, such as those representing poor countries or non-represented nations, tend to hail from elite social backgrounds (McConnell, 2018: 141). In the stereotypical view, diplomacy is about grand strategy, state interest, national elites. In reality, for most practitioners and increasingly so, diplomatic work is mostly about standardized offices, frequent moves (rotation every 2–4 years), and bureaucratic hierarchy.

Today's diplomacy involves considerable flux amidst intense struggles around professional autonomy and rules of the game. The literature on this (e.g. Constantinou et al., 2016; Kuus, 2016; Jones and Clark, 2018) foregrounds the struggles around how negotiation and representation should be conducted, what kinds of professionals should be recruited and promoted, and how training and socialization should work. These struggles are about the profession itself: not about particular ministries or policy issues but about the entire professional field globally. They are compounded by the profession's 'paradoxical' position in the contemporary landscape of expert occupations. Whereas the transformations of other professions can be characterized in terms of transnationalization (e.g. liberalization and deregulation of

standards), diplomacy remains 'fundamentally attached' to the nation-state (Constantinou et al., 2016: 28). This makes the transnationalization of the profession more difficult to discern and more illuminating of the struggles unfolding in knowledge-intensive professions in general.

Diplomacy is fascinating also because it is designed to be out of view. When diplomats succeed, we do not hear about them: long-term negotiations muddle along and not-fully-satisfying compromises are reached with little fanfare. Most people working at an embassy are not diplomats (i.e. members of the diplomatic corps), though this is not visible to most non-diplomats. The profession needs to be out of the view in part, a practitioner observes to me, because the work of compromise-making often undermines the national grand narrative. It may be that now is a good time to stand up for diplomatic values, another practitioner (Jan Melissen) notes, but he quickly adds: 'But in an electoral sense, it's not something you want to shout too loudly' (Brown, 2019). Effective diplomats receive popular coverage only when the system fails. 'Much of the most difficult coalition building', a diplomat says to Jones and Clark (2019: 1270), 'happens out of the spotlight, in private and informal settings.' There is an intricate topography to such settings. It is, on the one hand, a topography of a particular place, such as quiet discreet restaurants for a lunch near the Berlaymont (European Commission headquarters in Brussels). It is also, on the other hand, a topography of a profession, known to work through lunches at quiet discreet restaurants. One needs to analyze the know-where of both the place and the profession to understand the processes of knowledge production. The empirical material extends from primary data to journalistic accounts: journalists need to know the 'where' of what they cover on a daily basis, and they do write about their findings (see also Kuus, 2019).

Transnational settings bring the geography, autonomy, and specificity of the work into sharper relief, and rarely as much as in Brussels. Even in highly technical spheres that clearly require specialist (e.g. legal) knowledge, understanding the 'sociology' of the negotiation and each partner in it is 'half the job', a national diplomat says. The feel required is a transnational affair that cannot be simply brought along from the home capital. In a national diplomacy, an interviewee explains, 'you have a line: a clear line of command. It is easy to find out how the line is defined'. Newcomers learn from peers, from the division head. 'Here', he continues, 'it is . . . a bit . . . more. . . . You cannot be sure that your immediate boss is the best role model [smile]'. 'The Brussels skill . . . [he appears to be sifting sand through his fingers as he speaks] . . . you cannot apply what your learned in your ministry'. When asked what kinds of skills they notice among those who succeed in EU institutions, another long-time insider underscores the peculiar transnationalism of the work. 'These people [i.e. the successful ones] are very comfortable navigating the transnational.' In-depth studies of EU institutions, often by French-based sociologists (e.g. Georgakakis, 2018; Kauppi and Madsen, 2014), all stress the complexities of that transnational scene (see also Bachmann, 2016; Kuus, 2014).

What a diplomat (or a sociologist) calls sociology is, in part, geography, as it has to do with the place-specific dynamics of the negotiation and the geography of the strategies involved. In Brussels, the sociology of recruitment and promotion is also the geography of these things, as the nationality of officials is a key criterion in recruitment and promotion (Kuus, 2014). That geography remains invisible from job titles: whether an official is a permanent employee of an EU institution or is seconded there by a national government is an important part of knowledge production but is not apparent from business cards. Ursula von der Leyden, President of the European Commission (the EU's civil service), tellingly calls her commission (which took office on 1 December

2019) 'the geopolitical commission', in part to convey the delicate geographical negotiation around the nationality of the 27 commissioners (i.e. what nationals get the coveted portfolios) and their top staff. The horse-trading about nationality indicates that professional power has a geography: not a geography that is widely touted but nonetheless one that matters. That geography directly informs the construction of diplomatic competence and expertise.

Diplomatic knowledge is centrally about place. It exists in the name of the state but its core function is to operationalize state interest in the context of specific places outside that state (Kuus, 2016). Diplomatic knowledge is 'deeply ingrained in experiential knowledge' (Constantinou et al., 2016: 13; see also Constantinou, 2013). Sophisticated grasp of place-specific context is often cited as a central facet of diplomatic work (Constantinou et al., 2016). At a posting, a diplomat needs to know where to go for information and contacts. 'Diplomatic protocol exists to take away surprise', a diplomat says: 'it's necessary'. But to be effective, 'you need to achieve something at the level of human relations. [. . .] What justifies the cost of all this [they gesture to their surroundings] is the capacity to advance national interest beyond direct messages. The ability to create *local* relationships of trust' (emphasis added). The frustration of a diplomat is often around the nationalist myopia in the home capital. A national civil servant might call up a diplomat and say: 'Tell them: the minister has decided!'. The diplomat often needs to respond: 'They don't care!'. A diplomat who does not have the *local* knowledge to 'save [national governments] from themselves', as one diplomat puts it, is ineffective. There is, to this day, no good substitute for a knowledgeable person able to thoughtfully navigate the specificities of places. When a recent *Politico EU* feature article on the diplomatic profession (Brown, 2019) concludes in the office of Dan Mulhall, Ireland's 'glad-handing' Ambassador to the United States, it is for Mulhall's recognized skill at just that. The ambassador is a scholar of W.B. Yeats, an Irish poet whose portrait has pride of place in his office. Asked about Yeats, Mulhall enthusiastically recites the 1919 poem *The Second Coming*. 'His emphasis', the journalist comments 'is not on the most often quoted passage, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold." It is rather on the later lines: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity".' Asked by the journalist if the quote is a comment on the state of world affairs, Mulhall smiles. 'Diplomatically'. A fitting ending for the feature and a thought-provoking comment on the work and expertise of professionals like Mulhall.

These small examples serve two limited objectives. First, they show that professional culture deserves sustained study because it has some autonomy: professional power is not synonymous with formal institutional power. Organizational charts matter, but the specificities of professional culture matter, too. The study of professions and the expertise produced therein does not downplay institutional structures or hegemonic ideas: it rather enriches our understanding of how ideas are formed and how they play out in particular institutional settings. Second, professional cultures have a bearing on how geographical knowledge is created and used in international politics today. This comes into a particularly sharp relief in diplomacy, but the dynamic is not specific to diplomacy. The connection cannot be represented in terms of a neat diagram but must be studied in qualitative terms. For all these reasons, diplomacy and other such knowledge-intensive professions ought to be among the foci of geographic scholarship.

V Conclusion: Specific intellectuals and the spaces of professional expertise

Conservative commentator David Frum (2006) writes this of Bob Woodward, the *Washington*

Post journalist who has authored many influential accounts of elite-level governmental decision-making in the United States:

> From his books, you can draw a composite profile of the powerful Washington player. That person is highly circumspect, highly risk averse, eschews new ideas, flatters his colleagues to their face (while trashing them to Woodward behind their backs), and is always careful to avoid career-threatening confrontation. We all admire heroes, but Woodward's books teach us that those who rise to leadership are precisely those who take care to abjure heroism for themselves.

Regardless of how we judge this kind of person, it is this chameleon-like quality that makes specific intellectuals and the professional cultures they inhabit important objects of geographical study.[6] It is *because* high (and low) principles are tempered in the grind of meetings that the specificity of places and relationships matter. It would be naïve to valorize these professionals, but discounting them is, to cite Foucault (1984: 72) again, politically dangerous. We can learn a lot, Kennedy (2016: 282) suggests, by 'taking a break from figuring out how "the system," works' to think about how its regularities are built, reproduced and contested by the professionals whose technical expertise undergirds these regularities. This does not imply that we ought to bypass debates about systemic issues; it rather requires that we look more carefully at daily professional practice in its anticipated and unanticipated effects.

This is a review paper in an academic journal, and I refrain from discussing current affairs, but we can hardly read about the diplomatic profession today without thinking of the impeachment proceedings in the US House of Representatives not so long ago. When American diplomats stress the importance of professional conduct to the United States Congress (NPR, 2019) or when judges from 20 countries march, in formal garb, to support judicial independence in Poland (Davies, 2020), they do so *as members of particular professions*. Their practices need to be contextualized in the everyday of these professions.

This article contributes to the work on the know-where of power relations by advocating the geographic study of professions. I use the concepts of professions and professional expertise rather than bureaucracy to underscore that my focus is not on institutions but on social fields or formations that have some autonomy vis-a-vis institutions. I blend insights that tend to be treated as anthropological (close-up view) by anthropologists and sociological (pertaining to social hierarchies) by sociologists but are also about the spatiality of power. The blending can open up new pathways for specifically geographical work and highlight the relevance of that work beyond our own discipline.

The argument here is about professions with a small 'p'. Just like most diplomacy is the variety with the small 'd', most law and finance are likewise practices best characterized as mundane, technical, and unglamorous. The agents in the geographies of professions are not those who use government jets but those who compose the briefing notes for the big brass on these jets. To speak of a professional culture does not imply one culture; it implies a field of struggle over the terms of engagement on a social field. In every profession, there are multiple geographies. A geographical study of professions and professional expertise is not about clear boundaries geographically or metaphorically; it is rather about 'following flows, backflows, and undercurrents' across ideation and institutional spaces and times (Peck, 2017: xiii). Conceptually, it is not about adjudicating among scholarly fields, such as the Bourdieusian sociology, the Foucault-inspired work on assemblage, or the broadly neo-Marxist work on neoliberalism. The task is to advance meso-level theorizing about how specific professional struggles, such as those over promotion, intersect with broader political dynamics far beyond any specific institution. This would enable us to better situate the

production of expert knowledge in the context of professional qualifications, norms, and traditions that regulate expertise while remaining invisible at the surface level of events. Methodologically, this requires a constant to and fro between individuals and institutions without making either the principal focus of the analysis: professional norms are enacted and contested by individuals, but they cannot be discerned outside specific institutional and legal contexts.[7]

That Frum speaks of the powerful *Washington* player usually goes unnoticed. The place of power is understood in national terms (i.e. the capital of the United States) in part because the geography of power is understood in national terms (Agnew, 1999). If we as geographers wish to unsettle that assumption, we need to show in empirical detail *how* places matter. The dynamic that both Woodward and Frum describe characterizes modern bureaucracies in general, but it operates through specific places. Woodward's books are helpful for understanding the powerful Brussels players, too, but anyone hoping to simply transport the insights from Washington to Brussels would be disappointed: to understand the how and the where of power in Brussels, one still needs to analyze *that place*. In the study as in the exercise of power, there is no substitute for understanding places.

A geographic study of professions foregrounds the place-specific texture of professional practice and makes that texture the basis of meso-level theorization. Once professionals are conceptualized as specific intellectuals in a Foucaultian sense, they and their everyday work – the analytical and political import of that work – come into focus afresh. As specific intellectuals, civil servants, officials, administrators, technocrats, or bureaucrats of various kinds are too important to be left in the shadows.

John Harris, the Founding Editor of *Politico* (Eder, 2019), said in September 2019:

> People do not really have the ability to say 'I want to understand what's happening in practice at the Environmental Protection Agency. I really want to understand the impact of unfilled positions in the executive branch including in the State Department, the Defense Department, the intelligence agency, that affect our relationship with the rest of the world.' We journalists have the ability to do that. So I think that's our responsibility. We geographers may have something to learn from Harris.

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Notes

1. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
2. The directive also defines the category of 'regulated profession'. A regulated profession is 'a professional activity or group of professional activities, access to which, the pursuit of which, or one of the modes of pursuit of which is subject, directly or indirectly, by virtue of legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions to the possession of specific professional qualifications; in particular, the use of a professional title limited by

legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions to holders of a given professional qualification shall constitute a mode of pursuit (Official Journal of the European Union, 2005: 6). The definition exemplifies the mutual constitution of expertise and the professions that validate it.

3. The most relevant work in IR is the broadly practice-oriented or practice theory work on international organizations and diplomatic processes. A review is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Adler-Nissen (2016); Littoz-Monnet (2017); Pouliot (2016).
4. This list is selective deliberately: to keep the scope of the paper manageable and retain its focus on 'studying up', I highlight the scholarship that focuses empirically on the design rather than implementation of policy instruments. I also prioritize the studies that focus empirically at the relatively high ranks in a particular institutional structure.
5. The unattributed quotes in the text come from the approximately 160 non-attributable interviews that I have conducted with professionals in diplomatic and EU-related institutions since 2007 (see Kuus, 2018, for a detailed explanation). I use the terms 'practitioner' or 'observer' rather than 'diplomat' because simple designations of professional background are misleading: most individuals quoted here have experience in national and EU systems; others also have think-tank, consultancy, parliamentary, or academic experience.
6. The kind of person Frum describes may seem objectionably conformist to many academics, but academics themselves may well appear that way to civil servants. In the words of Humphrey Appleby, a fictional mandarin in the BBC sitcom *Yes, Minister*: 'No one really understands the true nature of fawning servility until he has seen an academic who has glimpsed the prospect of money. Or personal publicity' (quoted in Lewis and Harper, 1992: 146).
7. Methodological dilemmas about access, scale, and generalization are inherent to the work: such dilemmas are beyond the scope of this paper, but see Kuus (2018, 2019).

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