

Methodological Reflections on the Prosopographical Study of Academics: Bourdieu's sociological theory and its application in a historical context.

Dr. Liesje Raemdonck

There are numerous ways in which historians have written the story of an important part of a nation's intelligentsia, the academics. Most common are the multi-page biographies, in which the life and works of one particular famous scientist are meticulously unravelled. Enlightening though it may be, the individualistic and often idealistic approach tends to treat the subject as part of *freischwebende Intelligenz*. Generally too little attention is paid to the structural background, such as the institutional setting and the scientific environment. Recent historical studies, however, have largely overcome this shortcoming by bringing the structural frame to the fore, without losing sight of the academics themselves. Under the influence of sociological theory, which has shown growing signs of historical interest since the nineteen seventies, the entanglement of both agent and structure became a basic principle in social sciences and in historical research in particular. Within the framework of the history of the academic world this implies focusing on the structures in which academics are engaged - and which structure their actions - as well as on the actions of the actors themselves, who in turn reproduce (or alter) the structure in which they are active. This 'structurationist' notion of duality, which exceeds the paralysing antagonism between the most rigid forms of methodological individualism versus methodological collectivism, has been translated in a variety of research methods. In this paper we will focus upon the inspiring prosopographical approach developed by Pierre Bourdieu for the analysis of the French (academic) elite and its impact on recent historiography.¹

¹ R. EYERMAN, L. G. SVENSSON & TH. SODERQVIST, «Introduction», in *ibid.*, *Intellectuals, Universities and the State in Western Modern Societies*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987, p. 1-15; CH. LORENZ, *De constructie van het verleden. Een inleiding in de theorie van de geschiedenis*, Amsterdam, Boom Meppel, 1987, 349 p.; A. SCHUURMAN, 'Mensen maken verschil. Sociale theorie, historische sociologie en geschiedenis', in *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis*, 22, 1996, 2, p. 168-204; P. VRIES, «Historische sociologie. Op zoek naar processen en structuren», in H. BELIEN & G. J. VAN SETTEN, *Geschiedschrijving in de twintigste eeuw. Discussie zonder eind*. Amsterdam, Agon, 1991, p. 301-341; P. VRIES, *Verhaal en betoog. Geschiedbeoefening tussen postmoderne vertelling en sociaalwetenschappelijke analyse*, Leiden, 1995, 220 p. (= Leidse Historische studiën, nr 1)

Apart from a short résumé, it is not our intention to elaborate on Bourdieu's theoretical writings, but to concentrate on their practical application — how prosopography can be used to explain the problematic evolution in the academic world. To this end we will have a closer look on Bourdieu's inquiry into the French academic elite, but especially on the writings of the French historian Christophe Charle, who has used Bourdieu's research method for his work on transformation and continuity in the French and German higher education systems during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. In his oeuvre² Charle not only reconstructs the logic of the university field, identifying the social and cultural data either allowing the structures to evolve or preventing them from doing so but he also informs the reader how he did so, providing full detail on every phase of the prosopographic inquiry. This particular methodological interest makes his work ideal for a critical evaluation of the prosopographical method. Even though it has led to innovative insights, for example in the problematic character of the French university system, some critical remarks are in order. The statistical processing of the biographical data does not always seem to be completely reliable, especially as far as the interpretation and representation of figures and tables is concerned. An in-depth investigation into some significant examples will clarify this and lead to some general remarks on the problems relating to historical prosopography. But first we will examine the place prosopography occupies within Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

Bourdieu: his theory and the prosopography as a research method.

As mentioned in the introduction Bourdieu's theoretical reflections can be situated in a tradition in which sociologists and historians have tried 'to escape both the objectivism of action understood as a mechanical reaction «without an agent» and the subjectivism which portrays action as the deliberate pursuit of a conscious intention'³. To this end Bourdieu developed a 'theory of practice as the product of a *practical sense*, of a socially constituted «sense of the game»'⁴. This *practical sense* is what Bourdieu calls *habitus*, or 'the durable

² His most well-known publications are: *Les élites de la République, 1880-1900*, Paris, Fayard, 1987, 556 p.; *Naissance des «intellectuels», 1880-1900*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1990, 272 p.; *La république des universitaires, 1870-1940*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1994, 506 p.; *Les Intellectuels en Europe au XIXe siècle. Essai d'histoire comparée*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1996, 370 p.

³ P. BOURDIEU & L.J.D. WACQUANT, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociologie*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, p. 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120-121.

and transposable systems of schemata of perception, appreciation, and action that result from the institution of the social in the body (or in biological individuals)⁵. In other words *habitus* is some kind of socialised subjectivity, which indicates that the individual is a social entity and cannot be studied *an sich*. Hence a thorough analysis of the social environment, in which *habitus* is being produced, must be the starting point of every historical and/or sociological investigation. This social setting is what Bourdieu indicates as the *field*: ‘a network of objective relations between positions, [which] are objectively defined [...] by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital)’⁶. Bourdieu’s focus on the construction of the field however does not imply the complete disregarding of the individual. On the contrary, the knowledge of the field, in which the individual exists as an agent, can only help you to grasp his singularity, because every particular vision of the world (*prise de position*) is constructed from the place one occupies within a given field. Positions in the field and stances are therefore inseparable and must be analysed as ‘two translations of the same sentence’.

According to these theoretical premises, academics must be approached through their position in the academic field, which necessitates a reconstruction of its structure and logic. The field being defined by the position agents hold at a certain time depending on the means they possess, this reconstruction comes down to the identification of field-specific capital: who owns what? and how have the agents acquired their capital? For the logic of the field can only be understood through a historical, that is, genetic analysis of its constitution, as current tensions that exist between positions are the outcome of prior conflicts. At this point prosopography enters the scene: the biographical screening of every member of the academic field is the perfect method for categorising field-specific capital and for reconstructing its genesis. In *Homo Academicus*⁷ Bourdieu maps out the academic field through a detailed biographical research on all agents, thereby distinguishing different forms of capital, such as inherited and acquired economic, cultural and social capital, capital of intellectual status, of scientific power, etc. The presence of each form is detected by a specific number of indicators. An entry in the *Who’s who?* for example indicates capital of political and economical power.⁸ This brings us to a difficult part of Bourdieu’s research method, which

⁵ Ibid., p. 126-127.

⁶ Ibid., p. 97.

⁷ P. BOURDIEU, *Homo Academicus*, Paris, Minuit, 1984, 317 p.

⁸ P. BOURDIEU, *ibid.*, p. 61.

came under fire from different critics. On what grounds does Bourdieu determine field-specific capital and what is his reductionism to certain indicators based upon?

Bourdieu is willing to admit that this is an arduous part of the research process, because one has to deal with a sort of hermeneutic circle: 'in order to construct the field, one must identify the forms of specific capital that operate within it, and to construct the forms of specific capital one must know the specific logic of the field.'⁹ However, a combination of intuition and professional skill makes it possible to enter this circle, after a long dialectical process of formulating, analysing and verifying or falsifying hypotheses. The fact that Bourdieu was a member of his own research population, and as such acquainted with the specific *illusio* of the field, made the process much easier. Historians investigating an unfamiliar field in a far or nearby past face a more difficult task, which requires a profound knowledge of the period concerned, a certain creativity to identify the proper sources and a good sense of historical critique. Demanding though it may be, it is not a 'mission impossible', as the work of Christophe Charle on different elites in the nineteenth and twentieth century has demonstrated.

Charle: an advocate of historical prosopographical research

Working in the wake of Bourdieu's theory and research method, Charle is a passionate advocate of a prosopographical approach. He is convinced that only through differential biography it is possible to reconstruct the relations between 'les institutions, les hommes et les oeuvres' and to investigate the possibilities of innovation and/or transformation based on insights on alliances with other factions of the dominant class.¹⁰ In addition, prosopography has the important advantage of compiling its own statistical data, using various sources, and not having to rely on the official discourse and the accompanying statistics.¹¹ But on the other hand, the prosopographical researcher should beware of serious dangers. The time-consuming

⁹ P. BOURDIEU & L.J.D. WACQUANT, op. cit., p. 108.

¹⁰ CH. CHARLE, 'Où en est l'histoire sociale des élites et de la bourgeoisie? Essai de bilan critique de l'historiographie contemporaine', in *Francia. Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte*. 19/20 *Jahrhundert*, XVIII, 1991, 3, p. 123-134; CH. CHARLE & J. SCHRIEWER, «Pour une histoire prosopographique comparée des universités Européennes», in J. SCHRIEWER, E. KEINER & CH. CHARLE, *A la recherche de l'espace universitaire européen: études sur l'enseignement supérieur aux XIXe et Xxe siècles*, Berlin, Lang, 1993, p. 10-21.

¹¹ CH. CHARLE, *La république des universitaires, 1870-1940*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1994, p. 15-16.

character of compiling data often leaves the final synthesis unfinished. To prevent this Charle supports the systematic publication of biographical repertoires, which will simplify future research by offering highly qualitative and precise information in a consistent way. Statistical processing of biographical data is only interesting if one has detailed information at one's disposal, which will allow one to transcend the level of general correlations. Nonetheless, the infinite complexity of reality can not be caught in figures and tables and that's why Charle brings in significant examples along with statistical data. But the contrast between the heterogeneous reality and the overall theoretical deductions from the statistical processing of prosopographical information, remains a predominant element in Charle's work.

Given the prominent position prosopography holds in Charle's historical research on academics, it is surprising to notice that reviewers have hardly paid any attention to it.¹² They usually confined themselves to expressions of admiration for the large quantities of data involved and the meticulous statistical processing thereof. Yet, the vital importance of the prosopographical aspect of Charle's work calls for a critical examination. To this end we will use an article from Charle published in 1993, entitled «Elite universitaire ou élite sociale? Les professeurs de la faculté de droit de Paris (1901-1932)».¹³ It is not our intention to give an exhaustive critique of Charle's use of prosopography; the remarks formulated on the basis of the article mentioned above, will primarily help us to detect the problems and restrictions of historical prosopography in general. Hence the choice for a short article instead of a monograph. Most observations, though, also apply to other writings from Charle's work.

The title, «Elite universitaire ou élite sociale?», refers to the problematic relationship between the academic field and the field of power. As members of the Parisian academic corps, law professors have reached the top of the university hierarchy. But have they also succeeded in conquering an important position in the field of power, in which other 'juristes' elites may perhaps enjoy a higher reputation? And if so, which strategies have they developed for this purpose? Furthermore, Charle would like to know which social reasons or motives lie behind

¹² With the exception of Christophe Prochasson, who makes some interesting remarks on the prosopographical approach in his reviews on *Les élites de la République* and on two biographical dictionaries. [CH. PROCHASSON, in *Annales. E.S.C.*, XLIII, 1988, 5, p. 1161-1165; CH. PROCHASSON, in: *Revue de Synthèse*, III, 1990, 367 p.]

¹³ CH. CHARLE, 'Elite universitaire ou élite sociale? Les professeurs de la faculté de droit de Paris (1901-1932)', in J. SCHRIEWER, E. KEINER & CH. CHARLE, op. cit., p. 45-59.

the choice for a professorship of law and to what extent these motives differ from other disciplines. To answer these questions Charle compares prosopographical data of three different groups — the professors of law active in 1860, in 1901 and in 1932. The results of this juxtaposition are reproduced in five tables; two of which are included as a supplement. No specialised knowledge of statistics is required to note the serious problems relating to both the representation and interpretation of these figures and tables. The use of one decimal place in the tables using a percentage representation immediately catches the eye. Table 1 for example tells us that 11.1% of the professors from the oldest generation belong to the small bourgeoisie or lower social classes. In absolute figures, however, only *two* professors are involved, which means that one person more or less will increase or decrease this figure with about 6%. It is abundantly clear that with such a margin the use of a decimal place is totally redundant and even unwanted, for it gives a false impression of precision. Moreover, it seems idle to choose for a percentage representation for such a small population and even if, for reasons of clarity, percentages are used, absolute figures should be included.

Not only the representation of the figures is problematic; their interpretation is also debatable. Again we will take the first table, regarding social origins, as an example. Charle puts three generations of professors underneath each other and claims to observe some shifts: the dominance of the higher classes decreases and the middle layers of the bourgeoisie improve their positions, with the exception of the legal professions. In his explanation of this phenomenon, Charle brings in the possibilities of self-recruitment versus the new meritocratic procedures, prestige and financial prospects of other legal professions and the modest economical and social capital of the middle class. To me this interpretation seems unfounded in relation with the above table. The so-called shifts are so small (5%, 1%, 10%, 1%, 6% and 3% for the 7 categories of social background), that they lack any statistical significance. Bearing in mind that only one professor more or less leads to a difference of 6%, Charle's claims hardly make any sense. Consequently, it may be stated that the statistical data don't really support Charle's explanations and consequently do not add any surplus value.

Charle's investigation into the position of professors in the field of power only reinforces this impression. To this end he uses four indicators: membership of an official commission, exercise of an 'expert' office, holder of a political mandate and a teaching assignment in a prestigious 'grand école'. Again the information involved is derived from prosopographical studies, but Charle himself notices the incompleteness of the figures which regard to the

youngest population. A 1932 biography, compiled by the professors themselves, was his only source, which means that external offices held after 1932 are not taken into account. For the 1901 population, however, the whole carrier was scrutinised, which hampers the comparison between the two generations. In spite of this knowledge, Charle makes the comparison without further adjustments, as if there were no problem at all. Apart from the lack of high quality information, again the representation and interpretation of the statistical data show serious deficiencies. First of all the category ‘sans’ (meaning those without a political mandate, ‘expert’ office, ...) also includes the ‘non-réponses’, so one can only guess at the number of unknowns, making it impossible to assess the exact value of the table. Obviously it is not easy to differentiate between the categories ‘unknown’ and ‘without external office’, for the information must be extracted from biographies, obituaries, and the like, whereby one does not know whether these sources would actually mention this kind of information. If one has a wide range of good documented sources at one’s disposal, the chances of completeness are fairly big, but what if only a few sources are available? Usually this indicates ‘capital-poverty’, meaning that the subject did not acquire an important position in the field of power, but there is an exception to every rule. And if one draws conclusions on the basis of very small shifts, like Charle, one exception might lead to a totally different picture.

As in table 1, Charle’s whole line of reasoning is built on minimal changes. In fact, in Charle’s opinion no alterations are needed at all to indicate an improved position in the field of power, for the percentage of agents with an external office will automatically be kept down by the rising number of professors in the total population. Consequently, the absence of a decrease in terms of percentage already signifies a strengthening of the professors in the field of power. Looking at table 5, the percentage of the number of professors’ position without an external office stays almost exactly the same and the absolute figures show a noticeable increase of the number of extern offices.¹⁴ Mind you, the absolute figures do not refer to the number of professors with an external office; a small calculation for example demonstrates that the 27 external teaching assignments from the 1932 population are held by only 20 professors — meaning that some agents taught in more than one ‘grand école’. This leads to less spectacular figures, but does not wipe out the differences with the situation in 1901. But

¹⁴ Especially the figures concerning the exercise of a political mandate are striking. In terms of percentage there is no significant change, but the number of mandates triples — from 3 to 9. But a closer look at these figures show that they are incorrect. From the 1901 population 3 professors are missing, so it is possible there were 6 instead of 3 professors with a political mandate or 29 instead of 26 without one.

one can wonder whether this increase in absolute figures is the result of a parallel expansion of the number of commissions, councils, consultative or regulating boards, etc., in the wake of widening functions of the state. And whether such an increase is accompanied by a certain devaluation of the power connected to the exercise of these external offices, which makes the elder generation more powerful, in spite of its numerical weaker position.

Considering all these shortcomings, perhaps it might have been better to investigate the connection between the population and the field of power in an other, non-prosopographical way, as Charle does in the final part of *Les élites de la République* (1987). In this study he acknowledges the limitations of the prosopographical method and uses another technique to examine the links between the administrative elite and the field of power. Through a detailed analysis of two historical events (the Colson and Bousquet affairs) he reveals the dialectic relationship between high officials and politicians. By doing so, Charle leaves the path of sociological theory and leans anew towards traditional historiography. This does not mean that the prosopographical study of elites is doomed to failure; on the contrary, in the first part of *Les élites de la République* Charle demonstrates the effectiveness of the method, how it could lead to new and interesting insights, without regarding it as a nostrum. Some phenomena are simply not quantifiable and therefore can not be studied through the prosopographical method. Very often this has to do with the fact that historians, in contrast with exact scientists, aren't always able to work with standard basic units, but have to deal with variable units, whose value changes in time.

By now it should have become clear that prosopography has to be handled with extreme caution, and that the rules of statistical technique should, by all means, be observed. A correct representation of the results and an apt use of the notion of statistical relevance are obligatory. In addition one has to resist the temptation of making maximum use of the fact finding efforts done, drawing far-reaching conclusions from minor or even meaningless changes. In the event of meagre results — indeed a common situation in the case of historical prosopography — this should be acknowledged and lead to adjusted conclusions.¹⁵ But then what's the point of

¹⁵ For an interesting example of how it should be done: P. CHROUST, «Deutsche Universitäten und Nationalsozialismus Forschungsstand und eine Fallstudie: Karrieremuster und politische Orientierung der Gießener Professorenschaft (1918-1945)», in J. SCHRIEWER, E. KEINER & CH. CHARLE, op. cit., p. 84-113.

making a prosopography? Not a superfluous question, given the fact that between the compilation, encoding and the final interpretation of the data many months and even years may pass. Furthermore, the historian will inevitably have to deal with considerable gaps in the database, because not everyone's life is fully documented. Finally the labour-intensive character of prosopography threatens to absorb so much time, there will be no more room left to use other sources or research methods, that might yield interesting results in a much shorter term. These objections can be anticipated in two different ways: the ideal solution would be to allocate the tasks over a group of researchers, so the search for information can be intensified, resulting in a thoroughly filled database. But as manpower costs money, most historians will have to content with the second, more pragmatic solution, which comes down to restricting the size of the research population. This will shorten the fact finding process, leaving more time to go through other sources and to investigate matters, that won't lend themselves to prosopographical processing. After all, not everything has to go through the prosopographical mill. Prosopography is not intended to give an all-embracing account of the past; first of all it is meant to outline the structure, which eventually can serve as the basis for the reconstruction of a more factual history.

Supplement

Table 1: Social origin

tableau n°1: Origine soicale comparée des professeurs de droit de Paris en 1860; 1901 et 1932

Orig.soc.	FP	HF	BM	PJ	FI	FM	PB	N
1860	11,1	5,5	11,1	33,3	1,1	16,6	11,1	18
1901	18,7	3,1	18,7	25,0	9,3	12,5	12,5	32
1932	6,2	4,1	20,8	25,0	12,5	22,9	8,3	48*

* Deux non-réponses ont été exclues pour l'homogénéité avec les échantillons précédents, le total réel des professeurs est de 50.

Abréviations: FP [fractions possédantes]; HF [hauts fonctionnaires]; BM [bourgeoisie moyenne]; PJ [professions juridiques]; FI [fractions intellectuelles]; FM [fonctionnaires moyens]; BP [petite bourgeoisie et classes populaires].

Sources: pour 1860 et 1901, Charle, *Les élites de la République*, p. 67; pour 1932, état-civil de naissance des professeurs (enquête personnelle).

Table 5: External offices

tableau n°5: Fonctions extérieures des professeurs de droit

Mandats	Sans	%	Député			Ministre		
1901	26	81,5	3			0		
1932	41	82,0	5			4		

Prof.	Sans	%	ScPo	HEC	CNAM	Ec col	EPHE	Autres
1901	24	75,0	5	1	1	2	1	2
1932	30	60,0	6	7	2	5	3	4

Commission	Sans	%	Etat	Inter	Les deux	
1901	21	65,6	11	0	0	
1932	33	66.6	14	2	1	

Expert	Sans	%	Public	Privé	Inter	Les deux	Cabt.
1901	19	59,3	10	1	2	0	0
1932	30	60,0	11	1	6	4	2

Légende: Sans [pas de mandat, de professorat, d'appartenance à une commission ou de fonction d'expert (chiffres incluant les non-réponses)]; ScPo [Ecole libre des sciences politiques]; HEC [Ecole des Hautes Etudes commerciales]; CNAM [Conservatoire national des arts et métiers]; Ec col [Ecole coloniale ou Ecole nationale de la France d'Outremer]; EPHE [Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes, IVème, Vème ou Vième section]; Etat [commission ministérielle ou consultant d'un ministère]; Inter [commission internationale ou expert auprès des organismes internationaux ou des gouvernements étrangers]; Privé [consultant du secteur privé]; Les deux [cumul d'au moins deux positions]; Cabt [membre d'un cabinet ministériel].