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## French prosopography. Definition and suggested readings

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### ABSTRACT

A certain kind of prosopography has since the 1970's been a key component in many studies undertaken by Pierre Bourdieu and his followers, for example in their studies on cultural fields. This course of research implies the collection of extensive data sets on the properties or assets of individuals belonging to the field. Typically the main objective is to explore the structure and transformations of the field itself.

The work by Gisèle Sapiro presented in this issue of *Poetics* is an eminent example of the French prosopographical tradition developed by Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators. This issue also offers some examples from ongoing studies in the same vein, namely the research at Uppsala

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University on different generations of American writers. The aim of the following is to outline the distinguishing traits of this kind of prosopography by means of a condensed definition and a few references to early contributions.

A Bourdieuan prosopography is a kind of collective biography. I propose the following definition:

- (1) prosopography is the study of individuals belonging to the same field;
- (2) it is based on a comprehensive collection of data (maybe hundreds of variables) on these individuals, e.g., their social origin, educational background, trajectories, their positions in the social space and in the field, their standpoints, in particular their position-taking in matters crucial to the field, and their resources in different respects—especially their holdings of symbolic capital specific to the field;
- (3) the same set of data should as far as possible be collected for each and every individual;
- (4) the main object of study is not the individuals per se but rather the history and structure of the field.

These four basic traits characterize the prosopographical studies undertaken by Bourdieu and his followers. Whether the data are treated by means of sophisticated multivariate quantitative

techniques (often correspondence analysis<sup>1</sup>) or in a more qualitative mode is of minor importance. The choice of techniques is depending on the availability and quality of data. In historical research it is in most cases difficult to establish exhaustive data sets, since information on educational background might be missing for one individual, on father's occupation for another, etc. In other cases, as in survey research, the questionnaires or information retrieval tools might be standardised in order to allow for multivariate data analysis.

Bourdieu's study on the Parisian academic field is a famous example of prosopography, as well as his work together with Monique de Saint-Martin on French top managers (Bourdieu 1984, Bourdieu and Saint Martin 1978). Correspondence analysis was used in both cases. Less well known outside narrow circles of specialists is the sociologist Victor Karady's pioneering work in collecting data on, inter alia, late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century French scholars, especially in the social sciences (Karady 1974). Besides using the material in various seminal articles, Karady has for many years generously put his filing cabinets at the disposal of many French and foreign researchers interested in French university and intellectual history. Another major practitioner of the prosopographical method is the historian Christophe Charle, who has undertaken extensive analyses of late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual, academic and political élites in France (Charle 1987, 1990, and 1994)<sup>2</sup>. An important contribution to the prosopography of French literature—and a point of comparison for Gisèle Sapiro who studied a later period—is Rémi Ponton's 3<sup>e</sup> cycle thesis based on information on more than 600 French authors from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ponton 1977; cf. Sapiro 1992, 1994, and 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence analysis is a set of techniques for the quantitative treatment of qualitative data originally developed by the French mathematician Jean-Paul Benzécri. These techniques are well fitted to map distributions of assets and systems of relations, which is why Bourdieu and his collaborators have made extensive use of them since the mid-1970's.

<sup>2</sup> Besides these monographs one should also mention three collections of biographical data on French academics (Charle 1985, Charle 1986, Charle and Telkès 1988).

Neither Karady, Charle or Ponton used advanced multi-variate quantitative techniques (with the exception of some unpublished attempts by Ponton). Nor did Gisèle Sapiro in her doctoral thesis on the French literary field during and after the German occupation, which was written under the supervision of Pierre Bourdieu and presented in December 1994 (cf. also Sapiro 1992). The thesis was a more recent offspring of this small but vivid French tradition. Sapiro collected extensive information on 140 French authors from the 1940s and early 1950s. For each and everyone of them she tried to obtain information on social origin, secondary and higher education, date of first publication, political and aesthetic standpoints, etc., in all 128 variables, though of course not complete for all individuals. It took in all four years to extract these data from a wide array of sources. Prosopographical research based on historical sources is a cumbersome and time-consuming task, which no doubt partly explains that full-fledged studies are relatively rare. Since then, as shown in the published book version of the thesis (Sapiro 1999) and by the contribution—based on her lectures in Stockholm in September 1995—in this issue, Sapiro has implemented correspondence analysis of her material.

I have already mentioned the notion ‘field’ several times. In a typical Bourdieu-inspired prosopographical study the individuals belong to the same field. The prime objective is to understand not the individuals or their interactions but the history and structure of the field itself—which in turn gives sociological meaning to the trajectories and destiny of the individuals. Most *Poetics* readers will be familiar with what a field, in Bourdieu’s sense, denotes.<sup>3</sup> A field exists where people are struggling over something they share, where something specific is at

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<sup>3</sup> As early as in 1983 *Poetics* published Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘The Field of Cultural Production, or: the Economic World Reversed.’ The most thorough demonstration of Bourdieu’s program for studying such fields is still Bourdieu 1992.

stake (for example in the literary field how to write and judge literature), where specific investments and entrance-fees are expected from new pretenders, where there are specific rules of the game, specific stakes, rewards and signs of authority. That all this is “specific” signifies that it is not to be found in other fields.

Take for example the literary field. It is populated by authors, critics, editors, scholars, specialized journalists and the like. Those who are to reside, feel at home and survive there must be prepared in a certain way. In Bourdieu’s terminology: they must have acquired certain dispositions that make them fit for the positions available within the field. From those newcomers who are to be recognized as, let’s say, critics—‘recognized’ in both senses of the word: identified as critics and granted the right to talk and pass judgements on literary matters—certain investments are demanded. Not only investments in reading and writing: the newcomers must have made acquaintances with certain people and intellectual milieus. They must have acquired enough knowledge about past and current struggles inside the field to be capable of distinguishing the legitimate or applicable themes of discussion, the appropriate styles of talking about literature—and the styles of reading literature. To procure for oneself a literary taste is a hard and lengthy labor of investment. In short, they must have accumulated a sufficient amount of the kind of symbolic capital that is specific to the literary field.

Maybe even more important than the precise content of the investments, the newcomer must demonstrate a general will to invest in and to profess adherence to the specific beliefs which underpin the struggles within the field. These beliefs that unite all the participants and render the possibility to continue the struggles despite (or rather, by means of) their disagreements, are the

beliefs in the importance and legitimacy of participating in the struggles on how to write literature and how to judge literature. The most scandalous offence against decorum would be if someone questioned not the value of this or that authorship but if struggles on the value of authorship are worth the effort.

A field exists only if it is sufficiently autonomous, that is, if the characteristics mentioned are specific to that field. This implies that sometimes it is not until after a rather extensive collection of data on the agents and institutions that one is able to know if the domain under study should be analysed as a field in Bourdieu's sense, as composed of several different fields, as a sub-domain inside a larger field, or maybe as a domain that is not at all be to be regarded as a field.

An important criterion for the existence of a (relatively) autonomous field is that it possesses its own consecration instances such as, to stick to the literary field, renowned publishing houses, academies, prize committees, leading literary journals, and influential critics and other arbiters in literary taste. If politicians, company managers or television talk show hosts are able to judge on the value of literary achievements, then the literary field suffers from a lack of autonomy. One focus in Gisèle Sapiro's study was the significance of the competing consecration instances in France during the German occupation.

Within the sociology of literature a peculiar division of labor often holds. Some studies give the bird's-eye view of how the system works, others take a magnifying glass to scrutinize the life and work of certain authors and their immediate environments. The research tools offered by the French prosopographical tradition are useful for achieving the synoptic view of the field as well

as an understanding of the human practices that, while being conditioned by the field, constitute the conditions for its development.

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