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Collective biographies and the theory of “literary field”: on the contribution of prosopography to the sociology of literature

Methodological proposals for a sociology of literary institutions

Two conferences held at the Stockholm Institute of Education
September 18-19, 1995

Gisèle Sapiro

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Prosopography. Definition and suggested readings

This issue presents two papers based on Gisèle Sapiro’s talks during three seminars in Stockholm in September 1995. They are written in English by Gisèle Sapiro in September 1995 and checked and copy-edited by Boel Englund and Lena Östensson.

Gisèle Sapiro, specialist in sociology of literature, is newly appointed CNRS research fellow at Centre de sociologie de l’éducation et de la culture, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Her doctoral thesis on the French literary field during and after the German occupation was written under the supervision of Pierre Bourdieu and presented in December 1994. It is an eminent application of the prosopographic method inspired by Bourdieu’s works.

A 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 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 itself.

These four basic traits characterise the prosopographic studies undertaken by Bourdieu and his followers. Whether the data are treated by means of sophisticated multivariate quantitative techniques (often correspondence analysis) or in a more qualitative mode is of minor importance, since 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 you might miss information on educational background for one individual, father’s profession 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 the French top managers. In both cases correspondence analysis was used. Less well known outside narrow circles of specialists is the sociologist Victor Karady’s pioneering work in collecting data on, i.a., late 19th and early 20th century French scholars, especially in social sciences. Besides using the material in various seminal articles Karady has for many years generously put his filing cabinets to the disposal of many French and foreign researchers interested in French university and intellectual history. Another master in the prosopographic genre is the historian Christophe Charle, who

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has undertaken extensive analyses of late 19th and early 20th century intellectual, academic and political élites in France. An important contribution to the prosopography of French literature—and a point of comparison for Gisèle Sapiro who studied a later period—was Rémi Ponton’s 3rd cycle thesis based on information on more than 600 French authors from the second half of the 19th century. Neither Karady, Charle or Ponton (or Gisèle Sapiro, so far) have used advanced multi-variate quantitative techniques (with the exception of some unpublished attempts by Ponton).

Gisèle Sapiro’s thesis is, thus, a late offspring of this small but vivid French tradition. She 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. Prosopographic research based on historical sources is a cumbersome and time-consuming task, which no doubt partly explains that full-fledged studies are relatively rare.

The first accomplished Scandinavian prosopographic study in this tradition was Ingrid Heyman’s doctoral thesis on the emerging field of nursing science⁷, which happened to be presented in September 1995 and intensively discussed during the seminar series in which Gisèle Sapiro made her interventions.

Gisèle Sapiro’s sojourn in Stockholm was arranged within the framework of a French-Swedish research co-operation program engaging on the one hand two centres at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Centre de sociologie de l’éducation et de la culture; Centre de recherche historique) and on the other hand two milieus in Stockholm (the research group Sociology of education and culture, Stockholm Institute of education; Department of Economic history, Stockholm University). This long-term program that started in 1995 is financed by the Swedish governmental special founding of “co-operation with foreign élite universities”, as well as by Maison des sciences de l’homme, Paris. The activities comprise exchange of researchers and post-graduate students, co-operation on courses and seminars within the doctorate education, workshops and conferences, publications, etc.⁸

Stockholm, March 1996

Donald Broady

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Besides these monographs one should also mention three collections of biographical data on French academics:
⁷ Ingrid Heyman: Gånge hatt till... Omvårdnadsforskningens framväxt i Sverige — sjukskötarskors avhandlingar 1974—1991. Göteborg: Daidalos, 1995, 346 p. The study is based on a set of data on the first generations of Swedish nurses to take a doctor’s degree as well as data on the form and content of their dissertations.
1. Anna Lena Lindberg, "Men Gud förbarne sig, hvilket Publikum!" Om konstpedagogikens rötter i Sverige
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8. Eva Trotzig, "qvinnan bär hemmets trefnad på spetsen af sin synål." Kvinnlig skolslöjd i Stockholms folkskolor decennierna runt 1900
9. Gisèle Sapiro, Collectives biographies and the theory of "literary field": on the contribution of prosopography to the sociology of literature and Methodological proposals for a sociology of literary institutions

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