French Academia in a Prosopographic Perspective

A Collaborative Joint Project

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The history of French universities remains largely unwritten. The national structure of the teaching corps partly explains this phenomenon, as it has played a part in orienting the historiography towards an examination of the disciplines, as opposed to institutions. Only Parisian academics, the profession’s elite, have been the subject of profound studies. The lack of work on the academic corps as a whole hinders our ability to fully understand French academia as an institution. In an effort to remedy this, a prosopographic project dealing with the French academic corps in sciences, humanities, and law between 1800–1940, started in 2011. Like all large-scale prosopographic projects undertaken by a sizeable team of collaborators, it required serious preliminary reflection on the kind of data to be collected in order to foster a genuine social history of the academic profession. This article defines the conceptual framework and practices of the study in progress, thereby endorsing it as an alternative way of writing university history in contrast to the traditional jubilee history.

Seen by the Revolutionaries as agents of the Church, the universities in France were suppressed in 1793. Initiatives led by Napoleon I resurrected them in a reduced form fifteen years later. In contrast to what can be observed in French secondary education during the same period, the university’s brief disappearance profoundly transformed the nature of the academic professions in France. Although its full development would actually span several decades, we can consequently date the birth of the modern French university to the First Empire. This slow process, which by the 1880s had transformed the professoriate of the Imperial facultés into academics in the modern sense of the term, is a rewarding object of study for those interested in the development of

1 Decree of 17 March 1808 creating the Imperial University.
3 The term ‘profession’ will be used here as ‘professional category’ or ‘group’ to describe a population whose central characteristic is exercising its trade in a strict regulative framework and in institutions that form a coherent whole.
professions. Yet in contrast to the historiographies of other Western European countries, relatively little research has been done on the history of the French academic corps in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christophe Charle and Victor Karady’s work (mostly dealing with the Parisian facultés) and several regional monographs aside. Moreover, due to the methodological and evidentiary diversity of publications on the subject, this work does not easily lend itself to comparison and at present a synthetic historical vision of the French academic profession remains out of reach.

Given that French academics constitute a centrally managed corps of civil servants, the lack of an overarching narrative seems somewhat paradoxical. Instead of enjoying the kind of autonomy that characterizes the status of their international counterparts, assent to Parisian authority has long typified the position of French academics. Today, the organizing principles of the academic milieu still draw more on vertical (disciplinary), rather than horizontal (establishment based) consideration. The existence of a rich, centralized source – the individual retirement files of public education personnel at the National Archives in Paris – ought to have made possible, if not a systematic study of the entire population, at least a series of comparative monographs drawing on comparable data. However, the underdeveloped nature of the

8 The individual retirement files of National Education employees are preserved in collection F17 of the National Archives. Those files of individuals born at least 100 years ago can be freely consulted. Files on those born later require special authorization.