

Prosopography and the Computer: Problems and Possibilities

Let me start with a brief comment¹ on a current problem which is much discussed at the moment in Germany: the census of May 1987 and the opposition to it of large numbers of the population and many experts. Newspapers have evaluated the total cost of this project at 100 million DM; about 600,000 people will be employed as enumerators in what is really a massive prosopographical research project. Both the government's interest in the census and the resistance to it are mainly due to the same set of circumstances. There are two main issues: first, the enormous possibilities offered by new computer techniques in handling this data and the consequent fear of abuse through the unification of the census data with fiscal, police or other data banks; second, the charge that the whole business will be an enormous waste of time and money, because the same data is already available elsewhere.

This debate is in my opinion very relevant to the subject of this paper. Undoubtedly the boom in the use of computers by historians is also stimulated by the possibilities offered by the computer for record linkage. One of the reasons for the recent growing interest in prosopography comes precisely from the specific needs of prosopographical studies in which the computer can be helpful. But the second issue, that of cost, should equally be kept in mind by any prosopographer, though in a slightly different way: it must be asked whether the use of the computer offers real advantages, or whether it may not result in wasted time, effort and money.

In this paper I will discuss 1) the prosopographical approach to historical research, its special problems and possible solutions, and 2) the advantages and dangers of implementing computer-based solutions. I will do this mainly from the point of view of a medievalist, but my arguments apply to modern and contemporary history as well.

Prosopography is one of the oldest approaches of the historical sciences.² Yet the more systematic interest in prosopography is quite new. I do not need to stress the pioneer works of Namier³ and Syme.⁴ But these innovative efforts had relatively few immediate consequences. It was only with the publication in 1970–71 of important articles by Nicolet and Chastagnol⁵ and Lawrence Stone⁶ that a real increase in prosopographical research could be noted.

Where did this new interest in prosopography come from? Is Stone right in suggesting that 'In terms of psychological motivation, these obsessive collectors of biographical information belong to the same category of anal-erotic males as the collectors of butterflies, postage stamps, or cigarette cards; all are byproducts of the Protestant ethic'⁷ Or should we follow Ronald

Syme, who in his day thought that a pessimistic and materialistic view of humanity was the inspiration of the prosopographical approach?⁸ Does this pessimistic view still fit better in our day than other historical approaches? I think that nowadays, whilst we cannot totally exclude a passion for collecting as a motivation for microscopic research, the truth lies more in the direction to which Syme alluded. Firstly, for reasons which I have no time to discuss here, there is a new orientation towards social history which found favour amongst German scholars only a few years ago. Secondly, and here I come back to my opening statement, when historians first cautiously approached the computer some fifteen years ago, prosopographical questions were soon found to be congenial topics for electronic data processing. So, for instance, German and international interdisciplinary conferences on electronic data processing in Rome (1975), in Paris (1978) or in Tübingen (1979) were also concerned with prosopographical approaches.⁹

But certainly the main impetus came from social history. 'Après beaucoup d'autres j'ai seulement éprouvé le désir et presque le besoin de m'intéresser à tous les hommes, et non pas seulement à ceux qui brillèrent par leur naissance, par leur état, par leur fonction, par leur richesse ou par leur intelligence'.¹⁰ This conception of social history, formulated by Pierre Goubert, could not be realised without studying the people themselves together with their conditions of life, their families, occupations or professions, careers, earnings and so on, by means of prosopographical research. Furthermore, this prosopographical interest involved not only the protagonists of history but everybody including those at the margins, or, as Irène Marrou formulated it, 'l'histoire à travers ses fantassins'.¹¹

Before we start to discuss the consequences of this argument for historical research, a definition of prosopography should be given. There have been many attempts to define prosopography, but what they nearly all have in common is a concern with the individual and his community. This aspect, the individual seen in relation to a given totality, is contained in the definition offered by Stone: 'Prosopography is the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives'.¹² The only thing perhaps which needs here to be defined more precisely is the notion of 'life'. Because in nearly all cases it is impossible for medievalists or even historians of more recent periods to get enough real personal data about an individual to enable the effective reconstruction of his life.

This is not something to be regretted, since prosopography should not be confused with biography. The prosopographer is interested in the research of life-cycles, which means he must look for pure demographic data on persons and their families, as well as data on professional careers, on education, income, wealth, and the like. Apart from purely personal data, the set of data assembled varies according to the subject under investigation. Thus only a well-defined selection of data should be of specific interest to the researcher.¹³ We will consider later the question of bias in these selections and of the standardisation of data which is often required when evaluation is assisted by a computer program.

Another definition of prosopography has been offered recently by Karl Schmid: 'An essential object of prosopographical studies is the identification

of individuals through their personal or family or similar relationships'.¹⁴ This surely is misleading; the individual can only ever be an intermediate aim of prosopographical research, not the final one. But the dividing line between biography and prosopography is not the only difficulty we are concerned with here.¹⁵ A matter of major importance, in my opinion, is the question of whether we should conceive of prosopography as a method or not. Stone was imprecise on this point in his article. He began with 'Prosopography . . . has developed into one of the most valuable and most familiar *techniques* of the research historian'. Later on he spoke of the relatively new invention of 'prosopography as a *historical method*'.¹⁶ The same inconsistency can be found in many articles and books. I would like to emphasise that prosopography can not be characterised by the use of a specific method but by its interest in specific questions in the field of social history. To succeed, the prosopographer must therefore use the whole range of methods and techniques of history and social sciences, from paleography, sigillography or heraldry to statistics and last but not least to electronic data processing. It is according to the nature of the specific topic that the historian chooses his methods and approaches. So unless we refer to the combination of all these techniques and approaches as a new method, which is not justified in my view, prosopography cannot be defined as a new method.

The possibilities and limitations of prosopographical research have been discussed these past years in a series of four conferences devoted exclusively to the subject. The first of these was devoted to methodological questions in medieval history, and was held in Bielefeld, in December 1982.¹⁷ Its aims were to discuss prosopographical approaches to different groups and strata of society, from bishops to peasants, from students to townspeople. Two conferences followed in Paris in October 1984. The first, organised by Françoise Autrand,¹⁸ was concerned with research into the personnel of the early modern state (thirteenth to seventeenth centuries); the second, organised by Hélène Millet,¹⁹ concentrated on the use of the computer for prosopographical research, covering ancient to contemporary history. The last of the four conferences took place at the École Française of Rome in December 1985.²⁰ Its general topic was 'La prosopographie. Problèmes et méthodes', and it covered again a wide range of research fields from the Romans to the exiles from fascist France. During these conferences more than a hundred papers were presented and discussed which dealt with a large variety of prosopographical interests covering topics as diverse as warships of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and Byzantine seals. In addition, I should mention the discussion going on in the review *Medieval Prosopography*, founded by George Beech, Bernard Bachrach and Joel Rosenthal and published in Kalamazoo,²¹ and various special issues of other reviews.²²

From a consideration of the research papers presented at these conferences and published in learned journals — and that includes many which are in the conceptual phase and many which may never reach completion — two points emerge more strongly than any others. First, prosopography has succeeded in overcoming the traditional barriers between institutional, legal, economic and social history. As examples I could mention the history of universities,²³ of the peasantry,²⁴ of representative institutions, of cathedral

chapters²⁵. In each of these cases the prosopographical approach has demonstrated its validity. Only a better understanding of the participants can lead us to a better appreciation of the functioning, success or failure of medieval or early modern institutions or of peasant or urban revolts. Here it is possible to work prosopographically not only on the leaders but also on the people acting in minor positions and sometimes, as in the case of the revolts, on quite ordinary participants. The enumeration of examples could easily be enlarged. Second, there are the dangers of prosopography, those outlined in my quotation from Stone. The collection of prosopographical data can easily degenerate into an end in itself. The damage is greater because in most cases the data collected remains inaccessible to others. The temptation to press ahead and collect data regardless of its value and purpose is greatly increased by the possibilities offered by the computer. Another problem lies in the handling of data which has been collected but which cannot easily be integrated into an historical narrative. On the other hand prosopographical studies in which results and interpretations are published without the database, i.e. the prosopographical catalogue, however they might increase the interest of the general reader, decrease the value of the work to other researchers.

Let me come now to my second main question. What can the computer offer the prosopographical researcher? Here again I must confine myself to some short guidelines which result from recent experience, and I must leave apart purely technical aspects. Of course computer techniques have made an enormous difference to prosopographical studies. Equally, there must be a minimum size of population to make computerisation worthwhile: for example, some hundred members of parliament or deputies to representative assemblies, Huguenot refugees, or many thousands of students, or even 400,000 dead monks and the people they pray for. This last project, as well as many others, is based on an enormous database. The number of new projects which have in view the creation of a database, for example on biographies of artists, on Domesday Book, on a whole urban society (Avignon in the fourteenth century) etc. is ever increasing.²⁶ And here the computer offers us an inestimable service. It allows us for example, in the case of the Münster project on necrologies, to identify groups, to date populations of monks, to check newly discovered necrologies, etc. Comparable results can be hoped from the Domesday Book database.²⁷ These two projects have one thing in common. Both databases contain all the data available. But a comparable procedure is excluded in most other cases.²⁸ In some cases such large databases might hinder the progress of historical prosopographical research. If the research and the prosopographical database is not done for a precise scientific purpose, the project is not very likely to succeed.

Another possible difficulty of very big database projects can lie in the fact that even if their intention is to facilitate access to the sources and make the data more available for all scholars, they might hinder further research in this field because there is no free choice any more: either you agree to work on this specific topic using the computer or you elect to study something else. A further danger lies in the computer's capacity to quantify. The techniques of record linkage, factor analysis and so forth must be carefully handled, or the results can be very misleading or incomprehensible.²⁹ It is up to the historian

to decide whether computer-generated results are significant or not, whether they establish wrong correlations, whether they invert causes and effects, etc.

Two other problems which have been at the centre of recent discussion are far from being solved. The first is how to constitute a group. Many prosopographies are diachronic.³⁰ Others concern groups living together for a certain time. The members of a cathedral chapter from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century are a different group to the members of a specific nation at the council of Constance 1414–18. This of course has consequences for the research itself. The other problem concerns the choice of data model or schedule. What data items should be chosen, what should be left out? This choice is of course crucial for what can be done afterwards with the assembled data. If the schedule is too detailed nothing very significant will come out of it. The lacunae in every file will be too numerous. If on the other hand it is too restricted only banalities will result. A. Zysberg has very adequately formulated this danger: 'éviter le codage qui écrase comme un rouleau compresseur ce qu'il convenait de faire ressortir'.³¹ The database — an artificial new source or meta-source — should not be mistaken for the reality or even as a reliable copy of it. It should be open to revisions and it should be kept in mind how it has been constructed. But once the construction of a database has reached a certain stage it can be very difficult to modify it to meet fresh research demands.

Let me conclude with two remarks. Prosopographical research has enabled the discovery of people who up to now, at least in medieval and early modern history, have lain somewhat outside the mainstream of historical interest, for example migrants, refugees, students, monks, peasants or even social outcasts. Many of the research programmes which are concerned with rather large populations depend on the computer and could not have been conceived and cannot be realised without the aid of sophisticated computer programs. This does not mean that a general revision of former research must take place, but we may perhaps achieve a better balance in our knowledge of different members of past societies. My final point is an appeal or rather a personal statement. Further progress which historians and prosopographers may make with the help of the computer will depend very much on efforts to unify computer-aided approaches to historical research, and the success or otherwise of such efforts.³²

Notes

1. This text is an only slightly altered draft of the text presented at the conference.
2. Cf. N. Bulst, 'Zum Gegenstand und zur Methode von Prosopographie', in *Medieval Lives and the Historian. Studies in Medieval Prosopography*. Proceedings of the First International Interdisciplinary Conference on Medieval Prosopography, University of Bielefeld, 1982, Kalamazoo, 1986, p. 1.
3. L. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, London, 1925, 2 vols.
4. R. Syme, *Roman Revolution*, Oxford, 1939.
5. C. Nicolet, 'Prosopographie et histoire sociale: Rome et l'Italie à l'époque républicaine', *Annales E. S. C.*, 25, 1970, pp. 1209–28; A. Chastagnol, 'La prosopographie, méthode de recherche sur l'histoire du Bas-Empire', *ibid.*, pp.

1229–35. Cf. also the more recent critical article by J. Maurin, 'La prosopographie romaine; pertes et profits', *ibid.*, 37, 1982, p. 824–36.

6. L. Stone, 'Prosopography', *Daedalus*, 100, 1971, pp. 46–79.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
8. Syme, *Roman Revolution*, ed. Oxford, 1974, p. VIII.
9. *Informatique et histoire médiévale. Communications et débats de la Table Ronde CNRS (Rome, 20–22 Mai 1975)*, ed. by L. Fossier, A. Vauchez and C. Violante (Coll. de l'École française de Rome, 31), Rome, 1977, pp. 227–46 (with contributions of J. Glénisson, J.-P. Genet and F. Autrand on 'Prosopography and Social History'). *L'histoire médiévale et les ordinateurs — Medieval History and Computers. Rapports d'une Table ronde internationale, Paris, 1978*, ed. by K. F. Werner (Documentations et recherches, ed. by l'Institut Historique Allemand), München/New York, 1981, pp. 61–109 (with contributions of K. Schmid, J. Wollasch and F. Neiske). 19. *Kolloquium über die Anwendung der EDV in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Tübingen, 1979, in *ALLC-Bulletin*, 9,3, 1981, p. 19–21 (with contribution of D. Geuenich).
10. P. Goubert, *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730. Contribution à l'histoire de la France du XVIIe siècle*, Paris, 1960, p. VII.
11. Quoted by L. Fossier, in *Le Médiéviste et l'Ordinateur*, 10, 1983, p. 1.
12. Stone (as n. 6) p. 46.
13. Examples of different prosopographical catalogues may be found in C. Bozzolo and H. Loyau, *La cour amoureuse dite de Charles VI*, t. 1, Paris, 1982, pp. 47 ff.; H. Millet, *Les chanoines du chapitre cathédral de Laon 1272–1412* (Coll. de l'École française de Rome, 56), Rome, 1982, pp. 321 ff.; R. Descimon, 'Qui étaient les Seize. Étude sociale de deux cent vingt-cinq cadres laïcs de la ligue radicale parisienne (1585–1594)', *Paris et Île-de-France. Mémoires*, 34, 1983, pp. 101 ff.
14. K. Schmid, 'Prosopographische Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters', in *Aspekte der Historischen Forschung in Frankreich und Deutschland. Schwerpunkte und Methoden* (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 39), Göttingen, 1981, pp. 60 ff.; cf. M. Hillebrandt, 'The Cluniac Charters: Remarks on a Quantitative Approach for Prosopographical Studies', *Medieval Prosopography*, 3,1, 1982, p. 9.
15. This problem is discussed at length in Bulst (as n. 1) pp. 6 ff.
16. Stone (as n. 6) p. 46 and 49.
17. Bulst/Genet (as n. 1).
18. *Prosopographie et genèse de l'État moderne*, ed. by F. Autrand (Coll. de l'École Normale Supérieure de jeunes filles, 30), Paris, 1986.
19. *Informatique et prosopographie*, ed. by H. Millet, Paris, 1985.
20. *La prosopographie. Problèmes et méthodes* (Mélanges de l'École française de Rome, 99), Rome, 1988 (in press). This conference served also as a preparatory meeting of the 'Action thématique programmée' (A. T. P.) 'Prosopographie'.
21. Vol. 1 ff., Kalamazoo, 1980 ff.
22. Cf. especially *Le Médiéviste et l'ordinateur*, 10, 1983: La Prosopographie.
23. Cf. the excellent work of R. Schwinges, *Deutsche Universitätsbesucher im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte des Alten Reiches*, Stuttgart, 1986, which could not have been done without the computer.
24. L. R. Poos, 'Peasant "Biographies" from Medieval England', in Bulst/Genet (as n. 1) p. 201–14 (with computer use).
25. Millet (as n. 13) (with computer use).
26. For references see Bulst/Genet (as n. 1) and Millet (as n. 19).
27. A. Ayton and V. Davis, 'The Hull Domesday Project', in *History and Computing*, ed. by P. Denley and D. Hopkin, Manchester, 1987, pp. 21–28.
28. Another Domesday Book database in Santa Barbara will work with a selection of data, cf. R. Fleming, 'A Report on the Domesday Book Database Project', *Medieval Prosopography*, 7,2, 1986, pp. 55–61.

29. For a convincing demonstration cf. H. Millet, 'Une expérience: essai de classification des chanoines de Laon, *Le Médiéviste et l'Ordinateur*, 7, 1982, pp. 14–17.
30. Cf. Bulst/Genet (as n. 1), Introduction.
31. Fossier (as n. 11) p. 2.
32. See for example the enumeration of the different programs which the projects presented at the conference in Paris worked with (see n. 19) p. 354.