Researching Freemasonry in the 21st Century: Opportunities and Challenges

Masonic academic research today has reached a turning point. Carried on for decades by academics belonging to the Masonic order or philosophically near to it, Masonic scholarship continually sought out legitimacy from university and scholarly authorities. The research centres, chairs, seminars, and applications for high level international projects have multiplied, often with the support of Masonic Grand Loges. In parallel, these obediences created, welcomed or financed their own research institutes or conference centres. They understand the importance of their heritage: archival materials, pictures and artefacts represented a powerful support for the organization, illustrated by the often remarkable public artistic exhibitions.

However, the assessment remains mixed. *Masonic studies* remain isolated and still suffers from a recognition problem. It is therefore collectively that we need to think of the question of the bonds which still link Masonic research to the patronage of Grand Loges and to all kind of Masonic institutions. There also exists an equally difficult second challenge: the ritual invocations to Georg Simmel or Jürgen Habermas aside, how can we integrate Masonic studies into research on public space, social networks and networking, history of ideas, studies of individual trajectories or of the birth of a political culture for Latin Masonry (what do you mean by “Latin”? Latin America? Not clear for English-speaking audience), without making loges and their members a simple pretext, but by considering them as such and for themselves? The positivist, factual, chronological history of Freemasonry has undoubtedly its own interest. It constituted even a necessary stage. But from now on Masonic research must not only integrate the academic and professional rules of a researcher in the humanities and social sciences, but it must also put on its agenda the opening of innovative fields likely to attract junior scholars. It is at the price of this effort that the academic world will cease regarding it as an “unidentified erudite object.”

I The quest for scientific legitimacy of “Masonic studies”

Each year the Masonic bibliography increases by several hundreds of references throughout the world. The abundance of this production is nevertheless misleading. In France, for instance, the recent increase in the number of Ph.D. theses on the subject should not hide the fact that they are the product of both freemason and non free-mason scholars who often analysed an important amount of sources, but who largely ignore the standard university rules. Also, with 4 Ph.D.s achieved this academic year, the comparison with the number of theses in 18th-century religious or cultural history, or those on the political history of the 19th and 20th centuries is amazing. In the United States, in spite of the influence and reputation of Margaret C. Jacob, the number of Ph.D. thesis is still limited: let us quote among the most recent ones those of Kenneth Loiselle in Yale –John Merriman and Timothy Tackett as supervisors- *("New but True Friends": Freemasonry and the Culture off Male Friendship in 18th-Century France*), of Natalie Bayer –Margaret C. Jacob supervisor- (*Spreading the Light: European Freemasonry and Russia in the Eighteenth Century*), who are both Assistant professor at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, or the Ph.D. of Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs, *Builders off Empire. Freemasonry and British Imperialism, 1717-1927*, Associate professor at the University of Florida. The situation in Italy seems better. The impact of the great synthesis published by Giuseppe Giarizzo on *Massoneria e illuminismo nell'Europa del Settecento* was rather limited. However, at least three generations of researchers are simultaneously at work, from Giuseppe Giarizzo to Gerald Tocchini, through Vincenzo Ferrone, Gian Mario Cazzaniga and Antonio Trampus, and they all ask original questions: Gerardo Tocchini works for instance from a resolutely European point of view, at the intersection of cultural history of social practices and musicology. Vincenzo Ferrone, a disciple of Franco Venturi, is interested in Freemasonry in relation to the history of sciences and academic structures. For the contemporary period, Fulvio Conti associates history and political science and is particularly active, as the publication of his last book on *Massoneria e religioni civili* at Il Mulino shows. Spain offers also a positive balance with a very great number of Ph.D.-theses on regional or colonial history of the 19th-20th centuries. But on the whole, Freemasonry still attracts too little of both students and supervisors in spite of the existence of a considerable mass of documentary sources, among which many remain completely untouched. I am thinking in particular of the files returned from Russia or of the files of the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin-Dahlem.

This weakness of scholarly investment also appears in the great national reviews, where articles concerned with the Masonic history are rare, even if it is possible to quote a few special numbers: *Massoneria e le forme della sociabilità nell'Europa delle Europa del Settecento* published in *Il Vieusseux* in 1991, the special issue "Massoneria e politica in Europa fra Ottocento e Novecento" published under the direction of Fulvio Conti in *Memoria e Ricerca, Rivista di storia contemporanea*, in 1999, and in France the 1987-issue of *Dix-huitième siècle* (Eighteenth century review) and more recently the Bordeaux review *Lumières*. There exist certainly specialized Masonic reviews among which we can quote -without seeking exhaustiveness- *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, review of the research lodge *Quatuor Coronati Lodge No 2076*, *Quatuor Coronati Jahrbuch*, review of the *Forschungsloge Quatuor Coronati No 808*, Bayreuth or, in the French-speaking world, *Renaissance Traditionnelle* (NB: I am writing a French version of my French History article for Pierre's RT) and *Ars Macionica* (Belgium). But whatever their quality, their audience remains limited and they find it difficult to attract non-masonic authors, with the remarkable exception of *Quatuor Coronati Jahrbuch*, a model of scientific rigour and opening in direction of university research. Significantly, the researchers of German universities do not hesitate to publish there.

Certain specialists thus sought to develop university reviews specialized in Masonic studies. Some initiatives were not successful, for example *Zeitschrift für Internationale Freimaurerforschung* of Pr. Dr. Helmut Reinalter. On the other hand, the launching of the *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism* (published by Andreas Önnerfors and Robert Peter) received a warm and encouraging reception. This need to coordinate a too often dispersed research is also at the origin of the creation of Internet sites and specialised diffusion lists: let us quote among much others, *Pietre Stones Review of Freemasonry* of Bruno Gazzo.

Some works have been translated, like the PhD of Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann defended in July 1999 at the University of Bielefeld on *Die Politik der Geselligkeit. Feimaurerlogen in der deutschen Bürgergesellschaft 1840-1918* which has been translated in English and published by the University of Michigan Press (The Politics of Sociability: Freemasonry and Civil German Society, 1840-1918), but translations remain an exception.

If we wish to develop the scholarly production in the field of Masonic studies, in the form of PhD dissertations, books and articles, it is necessary to develop

authentic scholarly courses on Freemasonry. In France, the French “maconnologists” have cultivated until recently the nostalgia of the 1970es when Jacques Brengues occupied allegedly a chair of maconnology (*sic*) at the University of Rennes in Brittany. Actually, and more modestly, he was Professor of French Literature and a specialist of the 18th century, and he led a seminar on Masonic studies and supervised several PhD’s in this field. Both this specialized teaching and the seminar have disappeared since. In Paris, within the section of Religious Sciences at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, a prestigious institution, the chair of History of the esoteric and mystical streams in Early Modern and contemporary Europe, where Jean-Pierre Brach succeeded Antoine Faivre, approaches Freemasonry only indirectly. In Belgium, in spite of the assumed Masonic origins of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, a complete cycle of Masonic studies struggles to be set up. The Theodore Verhaegen chair - the name of the founder of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, founder of the Liberal party and Grand Master of the Grand Orient de Belgique - organizes conferences intended rather for the general public, but the courses of history of Freemasonry organized within the Interdisciplinary Research and Studies Center on Secularity - that I am providing since 2007 - have a limited audience, and are at the margins of the Faculty of Arts and of Philosophy. On the contrary, the initiatives taken in Great Britain need to be underlined. In Sheffield, the Center For Research Into Freemasonry and Fraternalism where Dr. Andreas Önnerfors succeeded Andrew Prescott after different fellowships in European universities (Lund, Freiburg in Brisgau and Nice) is developing a curriculum in Masonic research both at the BA and Master level. This initiative is remarkable also because it relies on a robust Internet site that allows an on-line education. In the Netherlands, teaching in the field of Western esotericism has been organised at the University of Amsterdam while the Grand Orient of the Netherlands supported in 2001 the creation of a chair of studies of “Freemasonry as an intellectual movement and sociocultural phenomenon” at the University of Leiden. Its first holder Anton van de Sande has been replaced since by Malcolm Davies. These creations are a first step. It is necessary now to make them last, to strengthen them and to increase their academic recognition, especially because the financial support of Masonic bodies has sometimes created some reticence amongst academics, even when the Grand Lodges do not intervene in scholarly aspects. Let us quote finally the seminar of history of the Freemasonry of Professor Katsumi Fukasawa at the University of

Tokyo, but it is still an individual initiative, which relies on the passion of this academic specialist of the Mediterranean trade and of maritime history, for the Masonic history of which he has become in the meantime a true specialist.

The research centres on Freemasonry or the research programs constitute another axis of the development of Masonic studies. In France, there is no research centre recognized by the Ministry of Universities and of Research or by the National Centre of Scientific Research (CNRS). The Centre of Study of Language and French Literature of the 17th and 18th centuries (CELLF) of the University Paris IV Sorbonne has a research team called Enlightenment, Illuminisme and Freemasonry created in 1996 and directed by Dr. Charles Porset. In Bordeaux, Pr. Cécile Révauger runs a seminar, organizes conferences and coordinates with Charles Porset a vast project, *The Masonic Universe of the Enlightenment*, truly structuring for Masonic research. At the University of Nice Sophia-Antipolis, within the Centre of the Early Modern and Contemporary Mediterranean and the research program CITERE (Communicating Europe: Early Modern Circulations, Territories and Networks) financed by the National Agency of Research, we also organize, Pr. Luis Martin and I, a series of international symposiums (the last one in Nice on 2009 July 2 & 3 on *Diffusions and circulations of Masonic practices in Europe and the Mediterranean 18th-19th centuries*), research seminars and investigations aiming to offering to the scientific community databases on freemasons of the 18th-19th centuries. These various actions rely on individual scholars and the lack of specific collective structures remains the standard. A contrario, Spain can has the *Centro of Estudios Históricos of Masonería Espanola* created at the University of Saragossa by Jose Antonio Ferrer Benimeli and on the Research Institute on liberalism, Krausism and Freemasonry of the Pontifical University Comillas of Madrid, a more recent creation. The Centre of Saragossa has organized since 1983 12 great international symposiums on Spanish, colonial and European Masonic history, the next one to be held in Almeria in October 2009, resulting in a total of 21 volumes of acts which exceed now thousand pages each. The approach to Masonry remains however very traditional and has difficulties integrating the methods of social history just as those of the history of political cultures. This is why researchers of the Center of Saragossa, notably Pedro Álvarez Lázaro and Enrique Mr. Ureña, both internationally recognized scholars in the history

of education and Krausism, and both members of the Society of Jesus, left it to found the Research institute on Liberalism, Krausism and Freemasonry.

In the German-speaking world, the principal research centre is at the University of Innsbruck in Austria: *International Forschungsstelle "Demokratische Bewegungen in Mitteleuropa 1770-1850"*, directed by Pr. Dr. Helmut Reinalter. It adopted a resolutely European approach which marks its originality. Its research programs and its many publications (notably its collection by the press Peter Lang) focus on the period known as the "revolutionary transition", that is to say the years 1770-1830, with a permanent concern to situate Masonic history in its social, cultural and political environment. The Masonic inventory and the mobilization of the archival materials of the Secret Archives of Prussia, the study of Illuminaten and of the Jacobins of Central and Eastern Europe are the main axes of research of the laboratory at Innsbruck. The *Wissenschaftliche Kommission zur Erforschung der Freimaurerei* completes the panorama by offering an interface between the laboratory of Innsbruck and the Lodge of research of Bayreuth. As in the case of Saragossa, the founder of the Centre, Professor Helmut Reinalter will retire shortly. This raises again the key question of the durability of these structures which are very related to individual initiatives and their personal influence and reputation. It is also necessary to underline the important activity at the University of Halle of a research centre dedicated to the Radical Enlightenment, Esotericism radical and Illuminaten studies (not the Illuminati currently running after Tom Hanks on our movie screens). Chaired by Pr. Dr. Monika Neugbauer-Wölk, the DFG-Forschergruppe "Die Aufklärung im Bezugsfeld neuzeitlicher Esoterik" (DFG-Projekt 529) is particularly active.

After being for a while in a rather uncomfortable position, Great Britain has today two complementary structures which address to a public both of specialists and interested researchers. The Canonbury Masonic Research Centre was created in London in 1999. It organizes cycles of conferences given by mason and non-mason researchers and financially sustains student research, just as the OVN in the Netherlands, which was created in 2001 to promote and diffuse university Masonic research in the Netherlands. Moreover, the United Grand Lodge supported the creation at the University of Sheffield - thus within a university framework- of the Centre for Research in Freemasonry and Fraternalism. Since its foundation, the Centre of Sheffield has been publishing invaluable sources, like the *Illustrations of*

Masonry by William Preston, and has organized conferences and international meetings starting with the 2002 meeting on *Lodges, Chapters and Orders. Fraternal Organizations and the Structuring of Gender Roles of Europe (1300-2000)*.

Proposals for a better integration of Masonic studies to academic research

Nowadays, Masonic studies suffer from a paradox. They are at the core of research on sociability and on public space but they benefit little from this position. Georg Simmel, Jürgen Habermas, Maurice Agulhon (*Penitents and freemasons*, and *The circle in bourgeois France* by the same author), Daniel Roche, Franco Venturi, Margaret Jacob were all interested in the Masonic Lodge as an observatory and a laboratory of public space. This pioneering work was largely produced by researchers who did not belong to the Masonic research "milieu", and for whom Freemasonry did not occupy a central position within their initial investigation. These researchers opened, exploited and then closed again the files of the lodges from the perspective of their own objects and programs of investigation. They did not get stuck in the administrative history of the order. They knew on the contrary how to situate in a convincing way the Masonic bond, its actors, their strategies, their speeches and representations in their social cultural, family, professional and political environment. But for these same reasons, their work had only a limited impact on Masonic research itself. These authors did not consistently modify the perception of Masonic sociability and its stakes within the community of freemason scholars. Instead of benefitting from this opening to integrate fully into ongoing research in social and cultural history and to put forward its own contributions, Masonic research instead isolated itself and locked itself up in the dead end of "maconnology." This is regrettable as the relevance and significance of Masonic history can only be fully grasped when articulated in a wider context. In other words, Freemasonry is a "complete social phenomenon." For many freemasons, there is the incorrect assumption that only freemasons can write the history of the order, because they consider themselves as the only ones capable to understand fully its meaning and its project. This is however not the case in other fields: most religious history of medieval or early modern era for example is not done by clerics and most political history is not reduced to the study of political factions. Similarly, one does not expect

a specialist of submarine war to embark on the Russian fleet of the White Sea or a historian of smuggling to become a clandestine frontier crosser.

If we want to coordinate Masonic research which is still too often conducted in a dispersed manner, it seems to me that it is urgent to launch a vast collective and truly academic programme to feed a prosopographic database of the freemasons in Europe and in the world during the 18th and 19th centuries. This collaborative and on line-accessible database will make it possible to show concretely to the academic community that no history of the Enlightenment or of European and colonial elites is possible without taking into account the Masonic membership of so many of its actors. It will be necessary to adopt what one calls in the history of sciences the "strategy of generosity", that is to say to open our files, to offer our expertise, to change opinions, do away with wariness and introverted perspectives and to show to all what a well-conducted Masonic studies can bring to the wider table of history writ large.

The study of social networks and of individual trajectories of social actors in the past is today a real success. It constitutes another remarkable opportunity for Masonic studies. The rise of research on social networks and more largely the renewal of social history make it indeed possible to consider another approach to Masonic sociability, to individual trajectories and to interpersonal relationships. Today research analyses interpersonal relationships without taking them separately but considering them instead as integral part of a web of relations: the study of its grid allows the historian to apprehend the extent of possible behaviour. In the same way, the *microstoria* which aims at "not studying the social subject like an object equipped with properties, but like a whole of moving interrelationships inside configurations in constant adaptation", makes it possible to situate the individual –and not the institution as we all have done- at the core of sociability. Membership lists and statements uttered in Masonic assemblies are no longer the only sources available to the Masonic historian. We need to take into account the "ego documents" of Freemasons – their diaries, autobiographies, private letters and personal newspapers – as they make it possible to understand individual Masonic trajectories and the social spaces in which Masons established their relational network, as well as the social, family, religious, professional environment of freemasons. It is hoped that by better understanding the individual choices of Masons in the past, it will be possible

to conciliate historiographical traditions which are too often unaware of each other: the history of ideas on the one hand, and social history of cultural practices, on the other hand, which in the case of eighteenth century-studies in particular ignore each other just too often, whereas they should be closely articulated. In the fields of modern and contemporary history, Masonic studies should also proceed to their own *aggiornamento* by integrating the methods and results of the cultural history of politics. It should also embark on a comprehensive history of international Masonic relations, as the one Dr. Joachim Berger, the editor of “European History Online", is undertaking at the University of Mainz, within the project on Masonic Internationalism (c. 1850-c. 1930).

Our research field is at a crossroads and has in my opinion real assets to further develop and organize in the objective of obtaining academic recognition, which is essential.