

Back to the basis

Occupations and the meaning of occupational titles in 19th-century Belgium¹

MICHEL ORIS²

Professor, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences – University of Geneva

This contribution has a simple ambition: scrutinizing the data, called the "occupation", that can be found in many demographic and other sources for historical research. From 1846/1847, the famous Belgian population registers, based on the census sheets, indicate for each inhabitant his/her *profession ou condition*. That ambiguous information is partly economic, partly social. At a global or macro-level, we can say that in the years that followed the end of the *Ancien Régime*, such indicator was rather a mark of social identity. Then, with industrialisation and the growth of capitalism it became more precise as far as the economic dimension was concerned. Such evolution is at least quite apparent in the typologies and rules applied during the general population censuses. In Belgium, it seems the transition occurred around 1866-1880 (see Bracke, 2008; and Perkins, 1989, 60-72, for the British case).

The two first sections of this paper deal with the ambiguous location of "occupation" between society and economy. In the first section the focus is on the meaning of "unemployment". The concepts of activity and unemployment are relatively recent. During the 19th century the declaration of an occupation, at the census or in another document, did not imply its real or full exercise. In the second section, we use an original source to demonstrate that even for the early 20th century it is difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the economic structure of activities from occupational titles. What is shown here is essentially that the same occupation can be practised in quite different economic contexts. In the third section, we discuss the limits of the classification tools that reduce occupational titles to numeric codes. This reduction is of decisive importance for the quantitative analyses of socio-economic models. However, we need to keep in mind that it results in a (too?) simple

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² Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Michel Oris: Michel.Oris@unige.ch

presentation of the world. Another pitfall that also explains the discrepancy between socio-professional and economic repartitions – and that affects both social and economic analyses – is indeed that usually entering only one occupation hides a reality of pluri-activity that remained important at least until the First World War. This section also tries to demonstrate the importance of an in-depth examination of occupational titles before numeric reduction. Such a micro analysis is optimally developed within the framework of the analysis of individual careers in various contexts.

The material discussed here comes from my PhD thesis (Oris, 1991). The area under study was the city of Huy, a little central place located some 25 km from the urban and industrial agglomeration of Liège. After the failure of the Hoyoux Steel Factory in 1837, Huy appeared to be a loser of the industrial revolution since it developed only some rolling mills and paper factories of a modest size. The city faced a "quiet" expansion compared to the industrial centres, raising its status of modest tertiary centre and growing from some 5,000 to 15,000 inhabitants during the 19th century. Like Leuven it is a good case of diversity and complexity in occupational structure and evolution (Matthijs, Van Bavel, & Van De Velde, 1997).

1. FROM OCCUPATIONS TO ECONOMY: THE IMPOSSIBLE MEASURE OF ACTIVITY

The ambiguity of a variable like "occupation or condition" obviously affects its interpretation. In practice, it is impossible to clearly draw a line between activity and inactivity, since indeed the declaration of an occupation does not necessarily imply its exercise. It is only in 1910 that the Belgian statistical office has devoted a specific statistic to unemployment within the censuses operations. That year, the building sector showed the highest level of unemployment (13.7%). This finding in fact just reflects the bias implied by the date of the census, December 31, i.e., in the middle of the winter (on the biases resulting from the census date, see Oris, 1990). In this way, the temporary absence of activity when the census operations took place is a first source of confusion. To this we can add the problems coming from the declaration of a "condition", i.e., a social status. Consequently, any rate of activity (ratio active/inactive) not only reflects the reality but also the social norms on gender and age (Hélin, 1976; Desama, 1986).

Figure 1 illustrates the age- and sex-specific rates of "declared" occupations in Huy in 1866, according to the population register data. The male curve shows a rapid growth from the age group 10-14 onwards, a constant level above 90 % between 30 and 60, and thereafter a rapid decrease. There seems to have been a tendency to declare an occupation as long as possible, as this is what still more than half of the men until the age of 75 did. According to René Leboutte (1990) it was an attempt to 'postpone' the final drop into an old age associated with becoming useless, and in this way to avoid a humiliating dependency and marginalisation.

This pattern was quite stable from 1846 to 1890, yet the youngest (aged 10-14) show an increase from 7.7 to 28%. This tendency does not reflect a real increase in child labour since Huy was pretty far from the savage excesses of the first industrial revolution. Most likely, a better registration of the apprentices, quite numerous in a city centre where the craft and trade activities were important, was the cause of this increase. Moreover, even the highest level (28%) obviously severely underestimates child labour. Mind that the latter was the object of many political debates in 19th-century Belgium, since it was related to the debate about the establishment of a compulsory school attendance and the religious *versus* laic conflict (Gubin, 1989). This made it a sensitive issue. Probably this under-registration can also be explained by the fact that young people were trained but not yet established. This is another indication that entry into an occupation was a social testimony rather than a strict economic indication. Based on this figure, the estimated median age at entrance in the "working population" was 17 or 18, which is obviously too high. Fortunately, the Huy archives also preserved several *registres de délivrances du premier livret d'ouvrier*. This *livret* or worker book was not delivered for all of the occupations, by far, but here the median age is around 12/13, what is more coherent with the observations of contemporary philanthropists (Oris, 2001, 44).

Among women, matrimonial life was the key element, much more than age. Teenagers and young adults started to work but the marriage was a break, if not in the exercise at least in the formal declaration of an occupation (Lichtfield, 1988 establishes that it is a general pattern in 19th-century European cities). Factors such as final celibacy, abandonment or bereavement could justify a comeback in the officially recorded working population. Indeed, single adult women declared an occupation three to four times more often than married women (see Oris, 2000, 183). Of course, most women never stopped working (Tilly & Scott, 1987, 148-169). As it was the case

with the absence of occupational declarations for most of the teenagers, the female pattern of occupational declaration only reflects the impact of the bourgeois family values (Lis, Soly, & Van Damme, 1985, 106; Tilly & Scott, 1987, 99-109; Alter, 1988, 91-111; Gubin, 1991). We do not know its respective influence on the household head and on the census agent, but the result obviously reflects more social norms than economic activity.

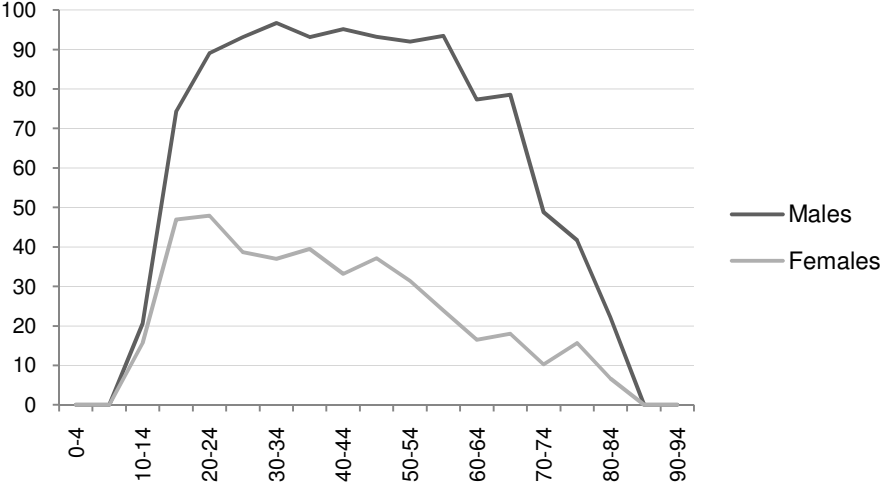


FIGURE 1: AGE- AND SEX-SPECIFIC RATES OF DECLARATION OF AN OCCUPATION, HUY, 1866

2. FROM OCCUPATIONS TO ECONOMIC BRANCHES: AVOIDING ANACHRONISM

The ambition to reconstruct the economic structure based on occupational titles went of course beyond a description of age and gender patterns. In a paper that remains famous in Belgian historiography, Eliane Gubin and Anne Van Neck evaluated whether data collected in 1846 could permit to identify the size of the three main economic sectors (primary, secondary and tertiary sector). They concluded that it was a "statistical trap", essentially because the many day labourers could not be attributed to one sector or the other (Gubin

& Van Neck, 1981, 300-301, 329-336; see also Klep, 1981, 105-125). I believe however this is not just an effect of the deficiencies of the sources.

First, the basic idea, i.e., using occupations as an indicator of economic activity, is questionable as we have just seen and can be demonstrated in more detail now. Already in 1949, the International Labour Office (ILO) made clear the distinction between terms that, even nowadays, are too often seen as synonymous:

"Par profession, il faut entendre le métier, l'activité professionnelle ou le genre de travail exercé ou effectué par l'individu, quelle que soit la branche de l'activité économique dont il fait partie (...). La profession d'un individu est le genre de travail qu'il effectue, alors que son industrie est déterminée par le genre de produits que fabrique son employeur ou le genre de services que fournit ce dernier" (Bureau International du Travail (B.I.T.), 1949, 7-8).

In other words, the economic structure of employment and the population repartition by occupation are not two overlapping realities (Verhaegen, 1961, 10-39; Vandermotten, 1980, 277-278). It depends on the biases discussed above, unemployment and declaration, but also on the gap between an occupation and the economic sector in which such occupation took place. A neglected source that gives us a chance to look at this discrepancy are the *listes d'électeurs du Conseil de l'Industrie et du Travail*, preserved in Huy for the years 1903-1906. These councils were created after the major waves of strikes and manifestations in 1886 and had to be the place for a dialogue between labour and capital (see Oris, 1990 for more details). Lists included only men, who were called to vote by economic branches of activities. But for each of them the lists mention first name, given name, date of birth and – most important to us – occupation! We consequently can cross occupation and economic activity, which is done in Table 1. In this table we keep all the entries in French, to not add even more ambiguities.

The data show indeed that more than one of four entries of occupation were ambiguous and could not be used to identify the economic activity. Possibly the occupational entry was not precise enough, in the case of *magasiniers*, *manœuvres*, *ouvriers d'usine*, *contremaîtres*, etc. on the one hand and *mécaniciens*, *chauffeurs*, etc. on the other. There was even more discrepancy with the 13 joiners (or carpenters) working in the chemical industries and not in the wood or building branch as could be expected, or with the same number of painters active in the little mechanical construction and not in the building sector.

Economic Branches	Occupations	N	%
Food	Conducteur de cylindre	1	0.88
	Contremaître	5	4.39
	Mécanicien	1	0.88
	Chauffeur machiniste	2	1.75
	Machiniste	7	6.14
	Magasinier	7	6.14
	Camionneur	2	1.75
	Voiturier	4	3.51
	Conducteur de bière	8	7.02
	Charretier	8	7.02
	<i>Total</i>		<i>45</i>
<i>Total of electors Food</i>		<i>114</i>	<i>100.00</i>
Stone-pit	Manœuvre	5	55.56
	Voiturier	1	11.11
	<i>Total</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>66.67</i>
<i>Total of electors Stone-pit</i>		<i>9</i>	<i>100.00</i>
Chemical Industry (paper, soap)	Chef d'entretien	1	0.32
	Chef de camionnage	1	0.32
	Surveillant	4	1.28
	Chef d'atelier	1	0.32
	Contremaître	7	2.24
	Chaudronnier	1	0.32
	Ajusteur	4	1.28
	Forgeron	5	1.60
	Machiniste	7	2.24
	Mécanicien	9	2.88
	Chauffeur	9	2.88
	Menuisier	13	4.15
	Ardoisier	2	0.64
	Maçon	3	0.96
	Tailleur de pierres	3	0.96
	Magasinier	5	1.60
	Charretier	2	0.64
	Camionneur	3	0.96
	Voiturier	8	2.56
	<i>Total</i>		<i>88</i>
<i>Total of electors Chemistry</i>		<i>313</i>	<i>100.00</i>

Industry of little Mechanical Construction	Emouleur	1	0.13
	Sableur	1	0.13
	Trieur	1	0.13
	Surveillant d'atelier	1	0.13
	Hacheur	2	0.26
	Maçon d'usine	3	0.39
	Frappeur	3	0.39
	Décapeur	3	0.39
	Mortaiseur	4	0.52
	Rapeur	4	0.52
	Burineur	5	0.65
	Noyauteur	6	0.77
	Découpeur	6	0.77
	Chef de brigade	7	0.90
	Raboteur	8	1.03
	Manœuvre	40	5.16
	Chef d'atelier	3	0.39
	Aide magasinier	3	0.39
	Contremaître	10	1.29
	Ouvrier d'usine	30	3.87
	Menuisier	7	0.90
	Cuiseur	5	0.65
	Chef peintre	1	0.13
	Maçon	2	0.26
	Peintre sur émail	3	0.39
	Emailleur	7	0.90
	Peintre	13	1.68
	Chef magasinier	1	0.13
	Magasinier	25	3.23
	Charretier	3	0.39
	Commissionnaire	4	0.52
Domestique	2	0.26	
<i>Total</i>	<i>214</i>	<i>27.61</i>	
<i>Total of electors Mechanical Construction</i>	<i>775</i>	<i>100.00</i>	

Industry: Metallurgy	Manœuvre	2	3.03
	Ouvrier d'usine	1	1.52
	Contremaître	3	4.55
	Magasinier	3	4.55
	Charretier	1	1.52
	<i>Total</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>15.15</i>
<i>Total of electors Metallurgy</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>100.00</i>	
Coal Industry	Gazier	41	100.00
<i>Total</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>100.00</i>	
<i>Total of electors Coal Industry</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>100.00</i>	
Total of "ambiguous" occupations		404	30.65
(idem without the "gaziers")		363	27.54
Total of electors		1318	100.00

TABLE 1: OCCUPATIONS BY ECONOMIC BRANCHES AMONG THE ELECTORS OF THE HUY COUNCIL FOR INDUSTRY AND LABOUR, 1903-1906

Following this enquiry, it is obvious that we have to stick as close as possible to our sources and, as suggested by the ILO, to apply reading frames or typologies that remain strictly occupational. The latter signifies that we have to use the occupational entry first of all as a social indicator. Of course the occupational entry does have an economic dimension, but this dimension cannot be grasped easily and systematically. Among other things, a quite positive implication of this choice is that it avoids the necessarily misleading attempt to allocate the day labourers to one or another economic sector. From an occupational perspective, "day labourer" is a quite clear indication of the kind of job done, day by day, without stable engagement, consequently unskilled. So this kind of entry can be classified without ambiguity in a social or socio-professional classification.

3. BACK TO THE BASIS: MULTIPLYING SOURCES AND SCRUTINIZING THE ORIGINAL DATA

Another critical perspective can also start from the famous classification in three economic sectors. Developed especially by Colin Clark in his *Conditions of Economic Progress* (1957), but also by Fourastié, Fisher, Wolff or Kuznets, this tool has had a tremendous success, although it also was the object of many criticisms. For example, an important branch in 19th-century Belgium such as coal-mining can be seen as belonging to either the first or the second sector, without agreement among the authors. But the main objection is elsewhere, on the border between the secondary and the tertiary sector. The latter was qualified by Verhaegen (1961, vol. 1, 14-15) as a *fourre-tout* concept, because it put together great firms and individual practices, local authorities and the State, civil servants, little shopkeepers and layers, the use of elementary or the most sophisticated techniques, the selling of material goods or immaterial services, etc. The distinction between producer and seller is debatable by itself what makes it difficult to classify the craftsmen who produce, sell and repair (see especially Bouchard, Pouyez, & Roy, 1979).

It is understood that many economists, such as Clark, who did not pay much attention to the craft activities, of course did not do this out of ignorance. Their classification was a historically dated production, constructed during the "Thirty Glorious", the years of impressive economic growth that followed the Second World War in the Western world. We understand that the craft sector appeared as an outdated, declining sector. Moreover Clark had no ambition to describe a situation but to understand a process, to build a theory of economic growth. In his perspective, close to Keynes' demand theory, the most important determinant is the dynamic relationship between mass production and the growing salary masses, both essentially issued from the industrial dynamics. The intersection, the redistribution, the tertiary sector is indeed an undefined "rest" (see Clark, 1957, 375, where this is explicitly recognised). Clark himself expected his classification tool to be operational, not coherent. It is when historians want to apply such a classification to historical realities at a given time (cross-sectional approach) that it starts to be highly problematic. Even the many recent typologies or classifications that did not follow the tripartition remain quite detailed as far as production is concerned, quite poor as far as the services are concerned. The problem with

these tools is that their function is to summarise information while we often do not look at the basic data anymore. Another problem is, once again, related to the meaning of occupations as recorded in most of our sources. Let us start with the latter factor.

Indeed, it is well-known that Belgian census agents asked "the most important occupation" and constrained everybody to make such a choice among their various activities (Bracke, 2008). Consequently, we do not reach the essential dimension of pluri-activity. Only part of the pluri-activity can be observed through a source called *registre des patentes*. The freedom of producing and exchanging was established during the French revolution under the condition of a fiscal charge (Hannes, 1975, 18, 33-38; Kurgan-Van Hentenryk & Viré, 1981; Kurgan-Van Hentenryk, 1978). Everybody who wanted to exercise a trade or an industry had to pay a *patente*. The Dutch laws of 1816, 1819, 1823 exempted all those who were obliged to present a worker book (*livret d'ouvrier*), i.e., the proletariat and the domesticity (Kurgan-Van Hentenryk & Viré, 1981, 368). It is only in 1849 that a large part of the familial work (at home) has been exempted (Hannes, 1975, 18). Of course, because of the fiscal purpose, here the imposition unit is not the individual but every activity. Table 2 provides a summary of the situation in Huy in 1847.

A more careful reading of the basic document confirms that a distinction between production and services often was not pertinent. The list of *patentes* contains many entries of *marchand tailleur avec neuf ouvriers* (merchant tailor with 9 workers), or *marchands tanneurs* (merchant tanners). The individuals concerned can be identified as members of some of the industrial families that dominated that branch. Calling "merchant" the owner and leader of a factory shows an absence of conceptualisation that is typical of a pre-capitalist economic stage. It is relatively surprising to see such an absence in the mid-19th century, after half a century of industrial revolution. However, such ambiguity has survived since even nowadays the most common definition of a small-size or medium-size enterprise refers to the boss, who

"cumule toutes les fonctions dirigeantes, tant celles de la production, de la vente, de la gestion financière que celle du développement" (Kurgan-Van Hentenryk, 1981, 191).

Neglecting the distinction between industry and services, Table 2 gives a better view on the activity structure in Huy in the mid-19th century. Here each individual activity is counted. About 45% of the individuals declared more

than one activity. This proportion is even an underestimation since the most frequent *patentes* are those of *boutiquier* (shopkeeper, 24.5%), i.e., a generalist activity. Coming out as third is a double activity (*cabaretiers-revendeurs*). With 8.6% they are just a little less numerous than the simple *cabaretiers* (9.5%).

Branches	N	%
Inconnu	15	0.89
Houille	9	0.54
Métaux	109	6.49
Bois	58	3.45
Bâtiment	53	3.15
Papier	17	1.01
Produits chimiques	22	1.31
Textiles-habillement	62	3.69
Cuirs	99	5.89
Agricoles	78	4.64
Aliments	174	10.36
Transports	160	9.52
Commerce	412	24.52
Commerce-Cabarets	144	8.57
Cabarets	159	9.46
Soins de présentation	29	1.73
Finances	10	0.60
Professions libérales	56	3.33
Services publics	14	0.83
<i>Total</i>	<i>1680</i>	<i>100.00</i>

TABLE 2: REPARTITION OF TAXES ON ACTIVITIES (*PATENTES*) BY BRANCHES IN HUY, 1847

Although the above example is based on the use of a different source and quite different information than the occupations we find in the population registers, marriage acts, etc., prudence is in order when our sources present an obviously partial view by 'imposing' mono-activity by limiting the number of occupations per individual. A general question for all the classification tools used by historians is also how they deal with multiple entries, i.e., whether the classification procedures at their turn do not create such an illusion of mono-activity, such a simplification of the socio-economic structures.

These classification tools all replace the occupational entries by numeric codes and this is evidently a tremendous help for analysis (see van Leeuwen, Maas, & Miles, 2002 or Van de Putte & Miles, 2005 for recent essays, but this solution was established already in the 1970s). Since the development of the microcomputers the original entry is registered and stored in the database, and not only the numeric summary. In this way, competing classifications can be used and compared. Such a comparison of performance obviously depends on the researcher's objectives and consequently chances are few that it could validate one and disqualify the others... Anyway, such exercise is often evoked and rarely done (see however Richard Zijdeman's contribution as well as Van de Putte & Miles, 2006). My point here is a little bit different, i.e., that we work with codes that summarise complex and multiple information and that it could be beneficial to return to the original entries. In line with the preceding discussion, this point is particularly illustrated when we look at processes of "tertiarization".

One of the roads observed in 19th-century Belgian towns has been the choice for quality instead of quantity. This led craftsmen who wanted to survive the industrial development in the direction of services. In Brussels between 1845 and 1892 the art and luxury occupations grew impressively (Kurgan-Van Hentenryk, 1978, 87). In Huy the wood branch is typical for such an option. Between 1846 and 1896 the cabinet-makers (*ébénistes*) emerged while the number of carpenters (*menuisiers*) also rose. From 1896 to 1910, the former progressed while the latter declined. When we longitudinally follow individuals throughout the population registers, it is quite clear that it has sometimes been merely a formal change, with the same person moving from carpenter to cabinet-maker. But anyway this implied a change in the craft activity, namely a more commercial orientation based on quality. An 1890 advertisement is illustrative of such evolution. The Mossoux widow and her sons were active in small mechanical production; they also owned a factory of pianos and harmoniums and regarding this matter they thought the following information to be useful:

"les ateliers étant à la maison, les clients pourront suivre et contrôler l'exécution de leurs commandes" (Gougnard, 1890, n.p.).

In this modest contribution, we just pointed to the difference between occupation and activity. We also measured, in one peculiar case, the distance between a socio-professional structure and a population repartition by economic branches of employment. It is not a new issue, by far, but never really measured to our knowledge, and the importance of the hiatus – more than

25% in early 20th-century Huy – is quite striking. This is one reason among many to be cautious when using the declaration of an occupation in a historical source. This is a base for a social history that is of course closely tied to economic history, but more in an Einsteinian than Cartesian way. Future research could win a lot from a microscopic observation of the entry itself, and its changes during one individual's life in a longitudinal perspective. It is quite clear that we still miss appropriate studies of career profiles, to see how individuals coped with macro changes during the century of the industrial revolution and urbanisation.

ABBREVIATIONS

ILO International Labour Office

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Terug naar de basis. Beroepen en de betekenis van beroepstitels in 19^{de}-eeuws België

MICHEL ORIS

SAMENVATTING

De vermelding van een 'beroep' is te vinden in tal van historische bronnen. Deze individuele informatie is van doorslaggevend belang voor de studie van sociale structuren en veranderingen. Historici en sociologen hebben bijgevolg verschillende instrumenten gecreëerd, hoofdzakelijk codeerprocedures, die essentieel zijn voor de kwantitatieve analyse van sociaaleconomische modellen. In deze korte bijdrage willen we terug naar de basis gaan, d.w.z. naar de oorspronkelijke vermeldingen zoals die in de bronnen worden gevonden. Wij wijzen op hun ambigu karakter, hetgeen deels sociaal en deels economisch is. In de eerste plaats betekent dit dat 'activiteit' en 'inactiviteit' niet kunnen worden afgeleid op basis van de vermelding van het beroep als dusdanig. Ten tweede tonen we aan dat hetzelfde beroep in verschillende economische contexten kan worden uitgeoefend. Ten derde besteden we aandacht aan de moeilijke kwestie van de pluri-activiteit. Tenslotte moedigen we de analyse van beroeps carrières aan als een veelbelovende toekomstige onderzoeksmogelijkheid.

Retour aux sources. Professions et significations de la nomenclature des professions au 19^e siècle en Belgique

MICHEL ORIS

RÉSUMÉ

La mention d'une "occupation" peut être trouvée dans de nombreuses sources historiques. Cette information disponible au niveau individuel a une importance décisive pour l'étude des structures et transformations sociales. Les historiens et sociologues ont dès lors élaboré différents outils, essentiellement des procédures de codification, qui sont essentiels pour le test adéquat des grands modèles socio-économiques. Dans cette brève contribution, nous avons voulu revenir aux bases, c'est-à-dire aux mentions telles qu'elles se trouvent dans les documents, avant tout traitement. Nous insistons sur la nature ambiguë de cette donnée, en partie sociale, en partie économique. Premièrement, cela implique qu'une réelle activité ne peut être déduite simplement de la déclaration d'une occupation. Deuxièmement, nous montrons que le même métier peut être exercé dans des secteurs économiques très divers. Troisièmement, la délicate question de la pluriactivité est abordée. Pour terminer, nous plaidons pour une analyse fine des carrières professionnelles qui constitue une piste de recherche prometteuse.