

# French Dissertations in a Period of Transition, 1971–1990: Historical and General Observations for Information and Communication Sciences (SIC), Philosophy, and Art and Archaeology

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## Abstract

This introductory discussion attempts to situate French doctoral dissertations within a historical and contextual framework for librarians and researchers who require a working knowledge of French doctoral grey literature. As French doctoral research for this historical period presents a *terra incognita*, a cursory exploration of this research offers the uninitiated an instructive example of how French doctoral production produced uneven distribution among three disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Examining general contours of French dissertation production in Information and Communication Sciences (SIC), philosophy, and art and archaeology, an evolution of what is available in French dissertation research reveals the nature of this grey literature.

**Keywords:** disciplines, dissertations, doctorates, typology

## 1 French Doctoral Dissertations: Culture and Typology

International research students, as well as faculty may rely upon dissertation research for their investigations. Often, they utilize dissertations as opportunities to examine recent research vetted through graduate programs, or they may mine bibliographic and research designs inherent to

sound dissertation research. However, what is not generally known is that a French doctoral dissertation may represent a different set of requirements, or have a different designation, not easily understood by international researchers. For this reason it may be of interest to provide useful information and illustration. This is especially critical now that international librarians and researchers have access to SUDOC (Système universitaire de documentation), which provides bibliographic information records for individual French dissertations in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. There one can find dissertations representing different doctoral regimes, which may or may not be pertinent to the user. This discussion attempts to frame the differences in nomenclature as well as introduce librarians and researchers to the diverse range of French doctoral grey literature as reflected in the types of degrees and dissertations one may find in French bibliographic compilations, and in SUDOC.

This discussion will concentrate on the French doctoral dissertation as a source of information and knowledge. As grey literature, the dissertation represents the culminating efforts of the candidate within the accepted conditions and values celebrated by disciplinary cultures and the academy.<sup>1</sup> In France, the doctorate has had a particularly unique history, unlike that attendant anywhere in the academic world. Various doctorates represented different needs and condi-

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tions, as well as signifying capstone experiences in research and scholarly ethos. For this reason, it constitutes a unique phenomenon and forms a corpus of research reflecting the characteristics of respective disciplines. A bibliometric examination of dissertations representing three selected disciplines for 1971–1990, when major changes in degree structures became evident, and remain to the present, offers an intellectual topography of dissertation research and disciplinary cultures.

## 2 Different Doctoral Degrees and Dissertations

Doctoral education and its various protocols entail many characteristics of culture and place.<sup>ii</sup> Doctoral education exhibits many traits of its evolution and mirrors such characteristics when examined. It is true that doctoral studies require extensive acculturation within the requirements demanded by both professionalization and the discipline in which the advanced student is training. Influencing doctoral education is the additional considerations exerted by the national culture within which structures of doctoral education exist. Different countries have different traditions and each tradition exercises its own prerogatives and protocols demanded of doctoral studies and acculturation. For France, this evolution has reflected centralized approaches to higher education and doctoral educational reform; often, governmental directives have exercised powerful influence over university policy. No where was this more pronounced than the tertiary level of doctoral studies underwent reform.<sup>iii</sup>

Prior to 1984, the year that doctoral studies changed to its present discernable manifestation, there existed a doctoral system of research education that included three distinct doctoral programs and three distinct degrees. Essentially France possessed three doctoral degrees with distinctly different purposes, goals, and features. Depending upon these variables, a student would embark upon three different experiences of advanced learning and indeed, research acculturation. Theoretically, a research student could undertake the same subject, pursue the same ap-

proach, under the same advisor, and with successful completion and defense of dissertation, be conferred with three distinctively different doctoral titles. This tripartite model of doctoral education was distinguished for several reasons. Firstly, each doctoral degree represented quite different levels of acculturation and achievement, especially in terms of research and acculturation. At the apex, the doctorat d'état represented the highest levels of academic rigor and research prowess culminating in a massive dissertation that easily signify the candidates research efforts. The doctorat de 3<sup>ème</sup> cycle was w much shorter avenue, requiring a minimum of two years and capable of completion within three. The doctorat d'université represented a unique doctoral experience. Originally intended for foreign students, this doctorate could be achieved within two years with varying results, depending upon the student's preparation and commitment. This doctoral ecology as developed, offered a diverse and equally relevant scholarly results.

After years of serious introspection by academics, university officials and government ministers responsible for higher education and research, French universities changed their doctoral degree process from a three-tiered system to a single doctoral degree system. However the French system instituted a higher order degree analogous to a doctorate, similar to the German habilitation. This *habilitation à diriger les recherches* certifies one's abilities to supervise doctoral students engaged in advanced research.<sup>iv</sup> To the present the *doctorat nouveau régime* as it was formally known in 1984, became the singular doctorate bestowing the privileges attendant to academic professionalization and representing the next step to the higher degree of *habilitation à diriger les recherches*. Presently, only the *doctorat nouveau régime* is offered and attests to the student's research capabilities. For the researcher unacquainted with French doctoral ecology, different doctoral titles may be confusing, if not seriously misleading.<sup>v</sup> Qualitative concerns notwithstanding, French doctoral degrees prior to the final conferral of abolished re-

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gimes in the early 1990's do present a complex phenomenon.

Not unlike other Western countries, higher education in post WWII Europe experienced growth that impacted unevenly upon French higher education. French universities attempted to grapple with this phenomenon by ministerial caveat and prescriptions directed to a university structure that could ill afford to accommodate rapid changes.<sup>vi</sup> Research and pedagogy were uppermost in ministerial minds when doctoral degree changes were considered. Discussions of creating the *doctorat de 3ième cycle* were first broached in the early 1950s and led to the creation of this short form research-oriented degree. Originally intended and focused on the sciences, the *doctorat de 3ième cycle* produced scientists in all fields, especially where a growing need existed for the training of researchers. Later the *doctorat de 3ième cycle* was expanded to include the humanities and the social sciences, inaugurating the first conferrals in the latter 1950s.<sup>vii</sup> Soon the *doctorat de 3ième cycle* became the most awarded doctoral degree, outstripping the *doctorat d'etat* and the *doctorat d'université*. This additional pressure on the research apparatus of doctoral education in France exerted tremendous institutional pressure, leading to concerns over quality and direction of doctoral education, especially the purpose of research training.

The unique status of the *doctorat d'université* is remarkable for its unusual position and purpose within the French university environment. Originally it was intended as a possible degree for foreign students who wished to undertake advanced systematic graduate studies without necessarily satisfying the entry requirements demanded of French students. Often, the foreign student presented his/her degrees and qualifications from their previous institution and the French advisor would consider individual merit. Considerable variance could ensue creating essentially a spectrum of quality across any given population of such degree candidates. However, dissertations were considered original research efforts, after a sustained period under the direct and guided leadership of an advisor under whom

this research was to take place. Judging from the published catalogue of the society of this doctorate, fascinating topics emerged from this doctoral program, making its grey literature status useful for researchers outside France.

Special considerations surrounded and animated the *doctorat d'université*, making it a degree in a class by itself, quite removed from the stipulations and regulations governing the *doctorat de 3ième cycle* or the *doctorat d'état*. Its unique position made it applicable to the study of medicine and law where the consideration of employment in France per se would not constitute a labor market problem. Therefore, foreign students who did pursue medical and legal studies at the doctoral level could attain their respective degrees, with the understanding that professional employment awaited external to France. Humanities and social sciences presented the same prescription, whereas those who pursued the *doctorat d'état* or the *doctorat de 3ième cycle*, upon completion received full rights to professional practice and teaching and research professions. It can be stated without qualification that more *doctorat d'université* were conferred in the sciences than in the humanities or social sciences. A further manifestation of difference was exhibited in the nature of the study and the dissertation defended. Although, dissertations for the *doctorat d'université* may have been uneven since its inception, their idiosyncratic nature may have revealed more of the students interest than disciplinary acculturation, the *doctorat d'université* permitted foreign students with different undergraduate preparation a valuable opportunity to undergo sustained study at an advanced level.

In order to appreciate the various doctorates and their respective dissertations, an introductory examination of doctorates defended during the major transitional period in French doctoral culture offers an illustration of how disciplinary orientation and type of degree characterized doctoral research in France. When non-French researchers use the SUDOC database for possible information gathering, such differences may exert influence upon their attempts at ascertaining relative significance of French doctoral

research in selective fields. For this reason, the following classification offers insight:

### Typology of French Doctoral Level Degrees

**Doctorat d'Université** → Established in 1897 in all fields, for both French & foreign students [primary candidate population]; most diverse in quality and duration of studies; did not confer any professional status in France; ambiguous and least prestigious; dissertation range & strength is only guarantor of quality.

**Doctorat d'Etat** → Established in 1810, representing the highest research contribution in all fields; 10–20 years of preparation ending in massive *chef d'oeuvre*; necessary for full professorship; most prestigious doctorate. Predicated upon acquisition of lower French diplomas. Later, in the 1960's could be conferred for body of distinguished published research. Originally, required two dissertations, one major and one, minor; after 1968, minor dissertation suspended.

**Doctorat de 3e cycle** → Established in 1954 for sciences & 1958 for humanities, social sciences; three year long research technique oriented, with dissertation treating a very narrow subject within a discipline; indication of pursuing research techniques.

**Doctorat Nouveau Régime** → Established in 1984 for all disciplines; 3–5 years in duration; equivalent to and modeled on American Ph.D. Replaced all previous dissertation designations, including the prestigious *doctorat d'état*.

**habilitation à diriger les recherches** → Established in 1984; no time constraint; open to holders of the *doctorat d'état* or *doctorat nouveau régime*; higher order representing major critical accomplishment in field; by dissertation, or collection of articles, etc; required for full professorial status. Although not strictly seen as a doctorate *per se*, it represents the only avenue to a full professorship, once reserved for the *doctorat d'état*.

Mapping the intellectual topography of disciplinary formation within the humanities and social sciences provides researchers and librarians additional information on research trends and for the provision of research services.<sup>viii</sup> Examination of the French university doctoral dissertation system permits a unique vision of the sociology of knowledge as it manifests itself within a pivotal and extremely vital period of advanced research. For this reason, the years 1971–

1990 were chosen as they represent the major transformational phase in dissertation culture. This transitional period provides a crucial phase in the long evolution of doctoral degrees in France, representing a unique situation for research and the disciplines at large. One humanities, one interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, and one social science, discipline were chosen as they represent one canonical discipline, Philosophy, established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, SIC (an interdisciplinary & multidisciplinary field) established in 1975, and Art History & Archaeology, founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>ix</sup> These disciplines offer additional disciplinary characteristics represented within French doctoral typology; additionally, they are sufficiently useful as examples of dissertation literature since they represent distinctive orientations to research. Discussion of one humanities, one social sciences, and one more interdisciplinary discipline and their respective dissertation production offers some critical and salient characteristics useful for researchers.

### 3 Methodology

For purposes of this study, three disciplines were examined with the intention of mapping the evolution of doctoral degrees and dissertations for 1971–1990 when critical changes in degree structure and grey literature occurred:

1. *Information and Communication Sciences (SIC)*
2. *Philosophy*
3. *Art History & Archaeology*

SUDOC (*Système universitaire de documentation*) was used to gather these dissertations for 1971–1990, reflecting this transitional phase in doctoral dissertation culture. Although various non-electronic bibliographic utilities can be used, especially for pre-1971 dissertations, France has developed a centralized system containing bibliographic information on completed dissertations originating in most higher education institutions. Since 1995, a publicly accessible database has been in operation, gathering information on doc-

toral dissertations, making this a formidable utility for research appearing as doctoral literature.

## 4 Findings and Discussion

Upon examination of the data, disciplinary profiles emerge characteristic of SIC, Philosophy, and Art History & Archaeology. Data captured 517 dissertations for SIC, 2,491 for Philosophy, and 1,245 for Art History & Archaeology respectively. Longitudinal trends indicate differences in production, pertaining to the status of both disciplines within the context of French disciplinary culture and hierarchy. SIC is not a canonical discipline, while Philosophy is. Since SIC's inception within academia, it has produced dissertations within certain strong specializations. Among them are written communication, telecommunication, press studies, especially newspapers and magazines, revealing an orientation toward content analysis. Personal and general communication as well as public relations does not form a locus of exceptional activity. Philosophy to the contrary, represents a powerful discipline that is well-represented within French universities, claiming dominance since the middle ages. It produces dissertations in all sub-fields of philosophy, with strong orientations toward social, political, continental, with history of philosophy a strong locus of research activity. Modern philosophy, as well as the examination of classic philosophers, i.e. Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Leibniz, are well represented. Interestingly, analytical philosophy is not a strong suit; however, aesthetics is. Although these examples are cursory, they provide a general sense of what to expect in these dissertations.

Salient production and typological characteristics emerge from the data; when compared, they disclose degrees of disparity between SIC and Philosophy (See Tables I and II). The most striking difference from SIC and Philosophy is that the *doctorat d'état* makes a strong appearance in Philosophy, whereas, SIC grants the *doctorat d'état* at a much lower rate. Considering that the *doctorat d'état* represented the cold standard for dissertation work, the canonical status of Philosophy is supported.<sup>x</sup> The marginalization of SIC in dissertation work is reflected in *doctorat*

*d'état* granted. The *doctorat de troisième cycle* is the obvious dissertation produced, with the *doctorat de l'université* a negligible showing. Surprisingly, the *doctorat nouveau regime* was accepted and produced faster than expected. In Philosophy, the *doctorat d'état* still loomed significant after 1984, attesting to the fact that the *doctorat d'état* was the degree of preference for academic achievement over the emerging and, now standard *doctorat nouveau regime*. The focus of many *doctorat d'état* dissertations were on canonical well-established topics. The *habilitation à diriger les recherches* did not appear in either SIC or Philosophy.

**Table I:** Type of Dissertation in SIC

Total is 517

Year	D'Etat	3ième cycle ancien	3ième cycle	Université	Nouveau
1971	-	-	-	-	-
1972	-	1	-	-	-
1973	-	1	-	-	-
1974	-	7	-	-	-
1975	-	12	-	-	-
1976	-	14	-	-	-
1977	-	12	1	-	-
1978	2	14	0	2	-
1979	4	9	27	2	-
1980	2	27	6	1	-
1981	1	2	17	2	-
1982	1	0	36	1	-
1983	1	1	40	0	-
1984	3	1	78	1	-
1985	5	1	21	2	7
1986	1	0	15	1	8
1987	3	0	14	0	8
1988	5	0	11	0	23
1989	3	0	5	0	26
1990	3	0	1	0	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>272</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>19.7</b>	<b>52.6</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>18.8</b>

To offer additional perspective, if another discipline is compared to SIC and Philosophy, disciplinary disparities in typology become even more pronounced. Art History & Archaeology, form a unit in French disciplinary culture, and reflect both humanities and social science characteristics (see Table III). Founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it assumed an official status in the 1930's, but still occupies less canonical position. When compared to SIC and Philosophy, Art History & Archaeology reflects a middle posi-

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tion in dissertation typology. The *doctorat de troisième cycle* dominates production, but the *doctorat d'état* is well-represented, again, attesting to the importance that the *doctorat d'état* still held for researchers. Again, the *doctorat de l'université* is negligible, but the makes a faster departure from the reform year of 1984, indicating that it holds scholarly salience for French researchers. Subject orientation, indicates that more traditional subjects, i.e. ancient, medieval, or modern European art history is focused in *doctorat d'état* dissertations, while the bulk of dissertations are dedicated to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century arts. As with SIC and Philosophy, *habilitation à diriger les recherches* did not appear.

**Table II:** Type of Dissertation in Philosophy, Total is 2,491

Year	D'Etat	3ième cycle ancien	3ième cycle	Université	Nouveau
1971	25	60	-	13	-
1972	19	73	-	3	-
1973	25	23	-	3	-
1974	24	82	-	5	-
1975	22	95	-	4	-
1976	32	92	-	4	-
1977	27	65	4	4	-
1978	18	45	41	3	-
1979	28	45	67	7	-
1980	33	22	100	9	-
1981	23	11	117	6	-
1982	29	11	118	1	-
1983	20	11	128	6	-
1984	28	7	108	3	-
1985	30	5	78	4	9
1986	28	0	63	1	24
1987	47	0	79	2	38
1988	46	0	33	1	54
1989	23	0	17	0	66
1990	28	0	3	0	63
<b>Total</b>	<b>555</b>	<b>647</b>	<b>956</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>254</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>22.3%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>38.4%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>10.2%</b>

## 5 Conclusion

This cursory discussion has attempted to situate French doctoral dissertations in two humanities and one social science within the context of doctoral research culture and typology. 20<sup>th</sup> century French doctoral culture in terms of situating the

dissertation as evaluated information and knowledge within the context of disciplinary formation offers further evidence of how this form of grey literature may differ from international doctoral dissertation research. Beyond the general disciplinary nomenclature, French dissertations may fall under different appellations, critical to how that research was undertaken, sustained, and successfully concluded. International librarians, graduate students, and faculty, need to appreciate and understand that French dissertations may reflect these different research conditions. Beyond the scope of this discussion, it would be interesting to examine institutional affiliation and geographical dispersion of dissertation research to ascertain further venues of specialization. Focusing upon other humanities and social science dissertations would offer greater perspective on French dissertations, including disciplinary knowledge.

**Table III:** Type of Dissertation in Art History & Archaeology

Total is 1,245

Year	D'Etat	3ième cycle ancien	3ième cycle	Université	Nouveau
1971	6	15	-	1	-
1972	7	26	-	2	-
1973	6	33	-	1	-
1974	6	33	-	0	-
1975	6	38	-	0	-
1976	4	20	-	0	-
1977	2	45	4	2	-
1978	9	46	13	1	-
1979	10	25	51	4	-
1980	7	13	48	4	-
1981	18	18	79	4	-
1982	5	11	59	3	-
1983	9	5	68	5	-
1984	11	5	68	2	-
1985	5	0	50	3	7
1986	9	0	64	1	11
1987	11	0	47	0	13
1988	12	0	46	0	24
1989	4	0	9	0	32
1990	2	0	4	0	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>333</b>	<b>610</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>11.9</b>	<b>26.7</b>	<b>48.9</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>9.6</b>

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- i See Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. by Peter Collier (Stanford: Stanford University press, 1988).
- ii There are some very fine introductions to doctoral studies and its phenomenon within both the U.S. and Europe: see Oleg Kouptsov, compiler and edited by Leland C. Barrows, *The Doctorate in the Europe Region* (Bucharest: CEPES, 1994); George Keene Schweitzer, *The Doctorate; A Handbook* (Springfield, Illinois: C.C. Thomas, 1965); William George Bowen, *In pursuit of the PhD* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); *Histoire du doctorat: des origines à nos jours*, ed. et. al. (Paris: Andès, 1997).
- iii Consult Michel Debeauvais, "Doctoral Theses in France: A Case of reformitis," *European Journal of Education* 21 (1986): 375–384. Many concerns arose as to how such reforms would enhance French doctoral education, without compounding the problem of confusion over terminology and purpose.
- iv It has been observed that the *habilitation à diriger les recherches* is a replacement for the venerable *doctorat d'état*. For an interesting view, see G. Tod Slone "The Ephemeral Doctorate," *Contemporary French Civilization* 14 (Winter–Spring 1990): 85–88.
- v Doctoral reforms were not without critics and adversarial concerns, especially in the 1960's when the *doctorat d'état* was reformed; see Roland Mousnier, "Note sur la thèse principale d'histoire pour le doctorat des lettres," *Revue Historique* 234 (1965): 123–127; Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, "Thèses d'histoire contemporaine, faut-il bouleverser le système?" *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 14 (1967): 173–180; Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, "Le nouveau doctorat" *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 17 (1970): 127–136.
- vi For a discussion of the evolution of Parisian institutional and governmental higher educational changes, Christine Musselin, *The Long March of French Universities* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003).
- vii Essentially, the *doctorat de troisième cycle ancien régime* and its 1977 *doctorat de troisième cycle* manifestation are similar, except for minor formulaic changes after early 1970's nominal reforms.
- viii Consult *Annuaire des Docteurs (Lettres) de l'Université de Paris et des autres universités françaises; bibliographie analytique des thèses, 1899–1965* (Paris, Association Internationale des Docteurs (Lettres) de l'Université de Paris, 1967).
- ix For relevant examples of bibliometric studies of dissertation research, see Jean-Pierre V. M. Hérubel, "Philosophy Dissertation Bibliographies and Citations in Serials Evaluation," *The Serials Librarian* 20 (1991): 65–73; Anne L Buchanan and Jean-Pierre V.M., Hérubel, "Comparing Materials Used in Philosophy and Political Science Dissertations: A Technical Note." *Behavioral & Social Science Librarian* 12 (1993): 63–70. Edward A. Goedecken, and Jean-Pierre V.M. Hérubel, "Dissertations in Military History, 1973–1988: A Survey and Analysis." *Journal of Military History* 56 (October 1992): 651–657; L. Kuyper-Rushing, "Identifying Uniform Core Journal Titles for Music Libraries: A Dissertation Citation Study," *College & Research Libraries* 60 (March 1999): 153–63. An additional and fruitful approach which pertains to the intellectual maturation of a discipline is Jay H. Bernstein, "First Recipients of Anthropological Doctorates in the United States, 1891–1930," *American Anthropologist* 104 (June 2002): 551–564; a recent study, is Jean-Pierre V. M. Hérubel, "Geo-Bibliometric Mapping of French Geography: An Examination of Geography Dissertations Produced in France." *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian* 24 (2005): 83–101.
- x See Hérubel, Jean-Pierre V. M., "Pre 1990 French Doctoral Dissertations in Philosophy: A Bibliometric Profile of a Canonical Discipline." In Daniel Torres-Salinas and Henk F. Moed, eds. *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of the International Society for Scientometrics and Informetrics*, (CSIC) Madrid, Spain, June 25–27, 2007: 368–377.