Chapter 10

Consultants and Economic Power

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Economic power has two main dimensions (Aron 1961).¹ First, economic power refers to the domination exercised by large corporations over their workforce and over other companies. The influence of dominant firms and high-net-worth individuals upon other domains of human activities that have their own logics – especially politics – constitutes the second main dimension of economic power. In regard to the asymmetrical interdependencies within firms, among them and between big business and government, power consists of three capacities (Lukes 2005): the capacity to make decisions on contested issues, the capacity to control the agenda, and the capacity to make legitimate decisions because of the “belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige” (Weber 1964: 382). This power can be directly exercised by those who occupy preeminent positions in the firms’ hierarchy or mediated through actors that are external to their clients’ organizations, while prescribing them strategies, implementing methods of work and deploying management devices. Drawing on ethnographic and quantitative materials, this chapter analyses the sociological roots of the consultants’ domination: what are the characteristics upon which they establish their ascendancy? After a concise review of the sociological and management literature on consulting, the chapter sketches a morphology of the occupational group and second, it positions it within the field of power.

Translation from French by Jean-Yves Bart

¹This chapter draws on developments previously published in a paper: ‘Entreprendre et dominer. Le cas des consultants’, *Sociétés contemporaines*, n° 89, 2013, pp. 73–100 (with F. Denord, P. Lagneau-Ymonet and R. Caveng); and in a book: *Innover pour s'imposer. Conseil et consultants en nouvelles technologies*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014, 202 p.

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Brief Review of the Literature on Consulting and Consultants

The consulting industry has become a vast and profitable business: 2019 estimates for its annual turnover approximated \$ 500 billion,² which comes from private and for-profit corporations, and to a lesser extent, from nationalized companies, public authorities and even NGOs (Saint-Martin 2001; MacDonald 2006). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the largest consulting firm worldwide – Accenture – has multiplied its staff by almost 7 (477,000 people in 2019). The industry is as fragmented as it is booming. Several global firms – including the ‘Big Three’ (Bain, BCG and McKinsey) – serve the top management of multinationals; auditing firms (Deloitte, E&Y, KPMG, PWC), later followed by data-processing companies (*i.a.* Capgemini, IBM Global Services), have morphed into consulting supermarkets that provide their clients with management, as well as HR and IT, ‘solutions’. On the other hand, outsourcing strategies have multiplied the numbers of smaller consultancies and independent consultants, which either address smaller clients’ needs or operate on niche markets (we can even find a consulting firm (*DeVenir*) which specializes in the consulting sector).

Three main perspectives on management consulting co-exist in the literature: the normative, the evaluative and the critical one. Normative researches insist on what consultants and managers should do in order to increase organizational efficiency and to strengthen profitability. The *Harvard Business Review* disseminates digests of this business-school literature that has produced influential bestsellers like *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman 1982). A second perspective is more evaluative: researchers tend to assess the impacts of consultants on organizations and their workers (Faust 2012). Quantitative assessments are rare because of the lack of systematic and reliable data on the industry and difficulties in identifying the net impacts of consultants on organizations (Aspers 2006: 431). Instead, social scientists investigate either how the consultants convince their clients that the services they sell are worth their costs (Clark and Salaman 1998; Kieser 2002) or how they harvest knowledge and experience, mission after mission, and hence consolidate their expertise (Fincham 1995; Suddaby and Greenwood 2001; Collins 2003; Clarck et al. 2013).

The third perspective, which may be more critical (Clark and Fincham 2002) – *i.e.* that questions the consultants’ legitimacy –, documents the role of consultants in the diffusion of ideologies and managerial practices that contribute to the perpetuation of capitalism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 152; Fligstein 2001; Abrahamson 2011). As Clark and Kipping put it, “this sense of influence and power, combined with concerns in relation to their accountability, that has heightened the profile of management consulting in the academic literature and made it a thriving area of research” (2012: 1).³ More specifically, consulting displays a paradoxical

²This estimation is based on different sources, mainly: the FEACO and the Kennedy Consulting Research. This value could raflly change regarding the consultant field definition.

³We do not discuss here the professionalization literature on consulting (see McKenna 2006; Kirkpatrick et al. 2012), since it does not specifically address the research question of this volume: how to empirically study organizations and actors that occupy positions of power?

type of business relations; the clients pay to be told what to do and how to do it, by virtue of the consultants' expertise, experience and prestige. When these 'knowledge workers' (Drucker 1959; Alvesson 2012) advise executives and managers, domination operates in a reversal of traditional business relationships: here, the service provider has discretionary power and prescribes economic policies to her clients by virtue of the competence ascribed her (Kipping and Clark 2012: part 5; Thine 2014).

Exploring the social conditions for consultants to become 'institutionally-approved agents' (Ruel 2002) requires going beyond the analysis of the consultant-client interaction and/or the diffusion logics between organizations, and, instead, to position consultants within the system of relations that structures the field of power in which these agents operate. This is the main objective of this case study on consulting and consultants in contemporary France.

The Morphology of Consultancy: The Classical Attributes of Domination

Consultants are not a homogenous professional group. The classifications of consulting developed by public statisticians, professional unions and consultants themselves only partially overlap (Thine 2014). While the public statistician level provides a general map of the national economy – which befits its original macro-economic mission – the classification of the main federation of consulting firms (the SYNTEC in France) primarily reflects the national history of the profession. On the other hand, ethnographic research shows that consultants use three main criteria to classify themselves and hierarchize firms and activities in the sector. The first criteria refers to size: number of employees, revenue, scope of action. Secondly, consultants also distinguish their employers based on their origins: while the 'big' ones were the offshoots of Anglo-Saxon auditing firms (Ramirez 2003), in France, information systems consulting emerged with the development of large-scale computerization projects during the second half of the twentieth century. The third criterion used by consultants is the characterization of their clients, which includes hierarchical position and function. Strategic consulting primarily targets corporate general directorates as well as the central administrations of ministries. Management consultants, like HR, IT and PR specialists work for the managers of business.

Based upon these three classifications, five main categories of consultancy can be identified: management, information technology, human resources, public relations, marketing and research. Even though it is not easy to circumscribe them through public statistics, management and IT consultants make up 9 out of 10 workers that are coded by public statisticians as managers or executives (*'cadres et dirigeants d'entreprise'*).

Methodological Box

On the basis of the definitions of public statisticians, occupational trade unions and consultants themselves, the morphology of the group as a whole was first compared to that of French executives. Part 1 draws on data from the 2008, 2009 and 2010 surveys on employment (*Enquête Emploi*) conducted by the French national institute of statistics and economic studies (INSEE). The aggregation of the responses given at the time of the first interrogation for these years takes into account the revision of the French nomenclature of activities (NAF) and increases the number of individuals counted, but no individual is counted more than once (Bernard 2012). These data, as well the classification criteria used for their construction, are contrasted with indigenous categories of differentiation and the findings of the ethnographic study to shed light on the roots of the domination of consultants.

Otherwise, empirical works on ‘elites’ take a decision-making, reputational, or positional approach to defining the relevant population (Hoffmann-Lange 1987). Whether individuals are chosen for their direct participation in decision-making or whether informants are relied upon to draw up lists of names, the population is usually of limited size and the research is based on interviews (e.g., Kadushin 1995; Frank and Yasumoto 1998). Our conceptual framework leans toward a mixed approach that is predominately positional and, to a lesser extent, reputational. Without assuming any objective selection criterion to adjudicate between competing definitions, the study focuses instead on the legitimate reflection of power and prestige in the studied society. In other words, what well-established institutions label ‘elites,’ provide them with self-confirmation, and demonstrate their mutual recognition? The honors lists and rankings published by French newspapers and magazines have disputable authority and maintain a sectorial dimension. The *Bottin Mondain* lists members of the upper-class, which mingles noble lineages and old money. It delineates an ‘elite by birth’: by seeking mention for themselves and their offspring in this French equivalent to the Social Register, individuals assert their elitist claim and extend such recognition to other registered families, whatever the institutional position and personal achievement of their members (Grange 1996).

On the other hand, the *Who’s Who* in France is more suitable for constructing a population that captures the legitimate representation of those who occupy prominent positions in contemporary France. Containing around 22,000 biographies (with an annual turnover approximating 5% due to retirement, death, and replacements by newcomers), the *Who’s Who* combines positional and reputational logics. Featured individuals owe their selection either to their position in official organization charts or to their prominence in the media. The biographies include information (gender, place of birth, parents’ occupation, marital status, number of children, education, diploma, career, honors, and hobbies) that is checked by the editors.

That's why the prosopographical component of this research (Part 2) draws from the leading occupational directories (especially the *Guide du conseil en management*) and the *Who's Who en France*: to identify an 'elite of function' (Arrondel and Grange 1993) and in the process position the consulting elite within the 'field of power' (Denord et al. 2018: 283–287). The point here is not to assess the distinctive characteristics of consultants in general vis-a-vis their clients (executives, management and staff), but to situate the elite of consultants among the agents who occupy homologous positions of power. In other words, we are not interested in individuals as singular persons but as the holders of social characteristics whose properties depend on the structural positions to which they are attached. Consequently, direct access to powerful agents is not necessary, and profusion rather than scarcity of heterogeneous publicly available information is the issue.

This involves looking at the role of consulting as an aid in individual strategies to secure, retain or bolster positions that authorize the legitimate exercise of power over companies or administrations.

In this context, we use Geometric Data Analysis (GDA) which is a set of statistical methods that summarize and geometrically represent large datasets as clouds of points (Le Roux and Rouanet 2004).⁴

Gender, Class and Education

There is a very pronounced gendered division of labor among consultants. While 24% of consultants in information technology are women, there are 39.6% of them in firms specialized in management. Women are less present in those two main types of consulting than in consultancies specialized in communication, human resources and marketing and research. Overall, women are largely under-represented among the consultants compared both to the entire working population and to managers and executives. Despite prominent figures in the fields of communication and human resources, female consultants are rare and consulting remains a predominantly male activity, which is very often performed for male clients.

While the consulting sector conveys a virile representation of authority, it recruits and entitles relatively young high-skilled workers. The gap between the age of the service providers, their clients and the individuals working for the organization, whose management and supervisory staff hire consultants, is a common source of tension, especially during the early stages of consultants' careers. To cope with these tensions, the strained young professionals tend to fall back on the resources on

⁴For more details on GDA, see the chapter by Lunding et al. in this book.

which their contested legitimacy is based: loyalty to their direct hierarchy (i.e., the manager and the partner in charge of the mission rather than the clients); the employer's prestige and working methods (as opposed to those of the clients, whose dysfunctional aspects are more acutely felt during missions); the academic certification of their competences (as opposed to job experience) (Gill 2009).

Another distinctive characteristic of consultants is their social background. The fathers of consultants have indeed often pursued careers in the private sector, in managerial or supervisory positions (45% vs. 22% of people in employment and 39.6% of all managers and executives).⁵ In the same way that teachers' children tend to inherit affinities towards academia, this familiarity with the logics of corporate management and the values of the economic bourgeoisie gives consultants a 'practical sense' of the economic order and its principles (Singly and Thélot 1988): private property, corporate profit, individual success. Consultants tend to do well at school. They are more frequently holders of higher education degrees (86%) than the general working population (30.5%), and among managers and executives (76%). Consultancy is in effect the first or second most frequent career path pursued by graduates of France's top schools, especially business schools (in 2018, 28% at HEC, 29% at ESSEC, 22% at Sciences-Po).

As 'deserving' inheritors', consultants are quickly rewarded with higher average earnings than other managers and executives. More precisely, if we cross-examine age and pay, we notice that the earnings of consultants are higher, especially at early stages in their careers (Table 10.1).

Gender, class and education also affect the hierarchy among consultants. Whereas consultants in management are often graduates of business schools or holders of master's degrees in management, which up to the early 2000s required 5 years of higher education, IT consultants have more frequently 2 or 5 years of higher education behind them. In the former case, the high demand for IT consulting in the 1990s gave new career opportunities to technology degree graduates (DUT) in computer science and electronics. In the latter case, these are graduates of engineering schools. This difference translates into gaps in terms of social backgrounds and earnings: consultants in

Table 10.1 Distribution of monthly earnings according to the age of consultants and corporate executives, 2008–2010

	Under 29		30–39		40–49		50 and over		Total	
	Cons	Exec	Cons	Exec	Cons	Exec	Cons	Exec	Cons	Exec
< 2000€	26.6	47.5	12.4	23.4	10.6	13.7	15.4	12.8	16.4	20.6
2000–2500€	38.2	29.2	22.5	25.5	20.6	19.8	11.5	14.6	25.3	21.1
2500–3000€	19.1	14.2	24.9	19.3	21.2	19.2	9.0	18.4	20.5	18.4
3000–5000€	15.6	8.2	32.5	26.8	32.9	35.8	46.2	39.7	29.3	30.8
> 5000€	0.5	1.0	7.6	4.9	14.7	11.5	17.9	14.5	8.5	9.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Enquêtes Emploi (Employment surveys) 2008–2010, first interrogations

⁵This breakdown also includes craftsmen and retailers.

Table 10.2 Distribution of types of consulting, corporate executives and the general working population according to social background (based on the father's socio-occupational category), training and earnings. Percent

Father's socio-occupational category	Information systems consulting	Management consulting	Total consulting	Executives	Whole working pop.
Farmer	3.6	3.3	3.4	5.3	10.9
Professionals	14.4	15.3	14.9	14.6	12.8
Manager	31.2	37.5	33.9	28.6	10.9
Intermediate professions	22.6	21.4	22.1	21.3	13.3
Employee	10.1	10.7	10.5	11.1	11.7
Worker	18.1	11.8	15.2	19	12.1
Total	100	100	100	100	
Training					
Two-year higher ed. degree (DUT, BTS, DEUG...)	16.2	8.4	13.4	14.3	9.5
Bachelor's, master's	12.8	18.9	15.5	22.1	6.6
Five-year higher ed. degree and over	60.4	52.3	56.9	39.5	5.6
Other	10.6	20.4	14.2	24.1	
Total	100	100	100	100	
Earnings					
> 2000€	14.3	18.5	16.4	20.5	73.6
2000–2500€	27.9	20.4	25.3	21.1	12.5
2500–3000€	21.7	20.4	20.5	18.4	5.9
3000–5000€	29.3	28.8	29.3	30.8	6.4
> 5000	6.9	11.9	8.5	9.1	1.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100

management appear to be much higher in the social hierarchy (Table 10.2). The more the service consists of advising executives on the organization of their company or administration (which is what management consulting is about), as opposed to missions that are geared toward implementing a 'solution' or using a 'tool' (which is what IT consulting is mostly about), the more the consultants display the trivial attributes of domination: they are male, have a bourgeois background and have studied in the more (educationally and socially) selective higher education curricula.

The Position of Consultants Among French "Elites"

When compared to the overall working population (even if we only consider corporate executives), consultants display the characteristics of socially dominant agents. Can the same be said if we look only at 'elites'? This requires positioning

Graph 10.1 The field of power. Cloud of modalities in plane 1–2

consultants among holders of positions of power over the country's main economic, political and administrative, as well as non-governmental or cultural, institutions.

Based on a sample of 6999 individuals drawn from the *Who's Who*,⁶ Denord et al. (2018: 283–287) established that two main dimensions structure the French field of power: integration in the economic order and seniority within the dominant class. Consultants constitute circa 10% of the sample population. Contrasting them to the other agents populating the field of power in contemporary France, the former appears to make up a rather diverse sub-group, one that tends to be *less* exclusive than other 'elite' groups, such as high-civil servants or executives of large corporations (Graph 10.1).

Regardless of their activity, the executives of the consultancy firms listed in the *Who's Who* are clearly situated among the individuals who are well integrated in the

⁶From the 2009 edition, the sample is large enough to reduce the margin of error, and small enough to manually add information. For instance, we compiled the yearbooks of the most prestigious French higher education institutions ("grandes écoles"). We double-checked with the Guide des états-majors— a register of corporations and directors. We also consulted the directories of exclusive clubs (Jockey Club de France, Cercle de l'Union Interalliée, Automobile club de France, Racing Club de France). And the archives of the National Audiovisual Institute (INAtèque) and of three national newspapers (Le Figaro, Le Monde, Les Echos) were systematically searched for each of the 6999 individuals.

Graph 10.2 Consultants in the field of power. Cloud of individuals ($n = 715$) in the plane 1–2

economic order⁷ of the field of power (on the right-hand side in Graph 10.2). This strong integration in the economic order draws on several common characteristics: having an executive father, having been educated in part in private schools, and graduated from business-friendly programs (in prominent business schools or Sciences-Po Paris). Only consultants in communication and public relations, as well as independent consultants, appear to be more distant to the exercise of economic power: along the first axis, the former (who are more often women) are in an intermediate position between consulting and publishing and the press; the latter are halfway between independent professionals and commerce and industry.

⁷ 'From left to right, the first axis of the cloud of modalities sets the public sector against the private sector, cultural activities and professions against economic occupations, disinterestedness and public interest against private interests. The positions occupied on this continuum range from the most gratuitous activities to the core of a financialized economy: from arts and humanities to investment banking' (Denord et al. 2018: 287).

Along axis 2, the average point of the sub-cloud of consultants is very close to the intercept. In terms of class seniority, this central position of their barycenter indicates that the consultants appear rather diverse. Such diversity is not contradictory with the high social backgrounds that make consultants stand out from executives as a whole. Among 'elites', consultants tend to be normal: they are representative of the population that constitutes the field of power, and especially its economic fraction. More precisely, the consulting sector brings together individuals who owe their place and their career to the organization that pays them, and other highly-socially-endowed individuals, who are self-sufficient enough to consider a career as independent consultants. The former derive their credibility from the companies that hire them and from their degrees; the latter are entrusted by their clients, with whom they share social proximity and/or professional experience.

Consulting may not be an 'elite profession', but it is clearly a crucial occupation for people who aspire to positions of power. For youngsters, prior experiences in consulting may boost their careers; for soon-to-be-retired executives and high-civil servants, consulting helps them transitioning. The proportion of consultants that began their career in a different sector is very high (82%), as is the share of the individuals who have left consulting to work in another sector (79.4%) during the course of their career (Graph 10.3).

Used as an 'incubation' period, consulting offers the opportunity for 'fast-track' careers in former clients' organizations (Henry and Sauviat 1993). For senior managers and executives as well as high-civil servants, consulting offers them soft 'exit-strategy', before retirement, or after an M&A or a political shift that has sidelined them. In France, these 'soft exits' are especially frequent in strategic consulting. That is why consultants in strategy appear so dispersed along the second axis (Graph 10.4).

Their social characteristics (belonging to the economic bourgeoisie, and to a lesser extent to the cultural bourgeoisie) and academic properties (higher education degrees, especially those awarded by top schools) make consultants a 'deserving elite'. On the one hand, everything predisposes them to be familiar with the corporate world and with handling money. They are bourgeois in the strong sense of the term, endowed with the most traditional attributes. On the other hand, their academic qualifications and their competitive careers tend to confirm that they deserve to be where they are. Applied to the economic world, this belief in meritocracy is a cornerstone of the legitimacy of the power they exert for the benefit of the clients who pay them. However, it is the relative diversity of their backgrounds and

Graph 10.3 Sub-sectors of consulting in the field of power. Cloud of modalities in plane 1-2

trajectories that make them appear more open than other bureaucratic and economic ‘elites’. Thus, consultants contribute to extending the legitimation of managerial power. Under the cloak of meritocracy, they actually help in concealing the fact that social background, subsequently legitimated by the education system, remains a driving force in the devolution of economic power.

Graph 10.4 Strategy consultants in the field of power. Cloud of individuals ($n = 83$) in the plane 1-2

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