

## **PRESENTING DR. ANDRE LEGUEBE AND A BIT OF FOOD FOR THOUGHT ABOUT THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE.**

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The following text is the author's own translation of a short speech in Flemish, introducing Dr. A. Leguebe, when on January 10th 1990, he was awarded the Sarton medal for his contributions to the history of physical anthropology. The last paragraph addressing directly Dr. Leguebe was in French.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I was called on to address you solely because I am a palaeontologist working mostly on bones of Quaternary mammals and preferentially on such finds from archaeological sites. It is assumed that such a person knows something about human evolution and bones, and about physical anthropology. But it pleases me to take the floor, because specialists of old bones do not often have a chance to do so, except in restricted circles. Moreover, I am glad to present Dr. André Leguebe to you. As you know, today we pay homage to him for his contributions to the history of biological anthropology and in that discipline bones are present, both fossil and recent.

Andre Leguebe was born November 6th, 1924, in Pecq, Hainaut. He completed his secondary education, in the humanities, at the Athénée Royale of Charleroi and obtained the certificate of licentiate in science, option biochemistry, from the U.L.B. (Université Libre de Bruxelles) in 1946. In 1948 and 1949, he passed examinations before the Central Examination Commission for the certificates of candidate in biology and in geography, respectively. In 1968, his published papers were judged

sufficient for granting him the doctor title. He nonetheless took a doctor's degree, *maxima cum laude*, from the U.L.B. in 1975, with a dissertation titled *Etude anthropologique de la pigmentation cutanée*.

André Leguebe began his working career in the pharmaceutical industry and taught for some time in a secondary school. In 1951, he became a collaborator of the Institut Royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique in Brussels. From 1959 onward, he worked in the section Anthropology and Prehistory directed by Dr. Twiesselmann, whom he succeeded at his retirement. In 1987, he was appointed head of the section Recent Vertebrates. Last year he retired but, as I found out myself, one can still reach him quite often at the institute.

Dr. André Leguebe was affiliated with several scientific organizations, but I will cite only a few of his mandates : member and president of the *Conseil de l'Association anthropologique internationale de langue française*; councillor to the *European Anthropological Association*; and secretary of the *Groupement des Anthropologistes de langue française*. He was also involved, for more than thirty years, in the management of the *Société Royale Belge d'Anthropologie et de Préhistoire*, as librarian, general secretary, vice president and president.

The scientific activities of Dr. Leguebe focused among others on the genetics of somatic characters in our species; the frequency of bloodgroups; the variations of the structure of serum proteins and isoenzymes; research on twins and the degree of consanguinity in Belgium; the pigmentation of the human skin, study on which his already mentioned Ph.D. dissertation was based.

The bibliography of Dr. Leguebe, available to me, contains about 150 titles. He was involved in various projects abroad and taught in 1984 as a guest professor in Montreal. In 1975, he received the *Prix Paul Broca de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*. The same year there was also a Belgian distinction : the *prix Jean-Servais Stas* awarded by the *Académie Royale de Belgique*. Today, the Sarton medal is added to his academic honours.

Most of you probably are convinced that studying the history of science is important. But bear that I attempt to underline the fact once more and in my own way.

A first reason for performing historical research of the various sciences, has to do with scientific fertility. Confrontation with the history of his own discipline and the way its concepts developed, may render the scholar conscious of how research has been propelled into a particular direction and how, as it were, blind spots developed, maybe only as a result of the concepts in use. The awareness of these facts may effect a creative liberation.

Knowing how a discipline evolved may also have practical advantages. It can help to avoid that certain types of research are repeated needlessly and that somebody "reinvents the hot water", as we say in Flemish. Experience in my own discipline tells me that this happens more frequently than one realizes. This happens in other fields as well, for not so long ago I read in *La Recherche* about a forgotten technique. The paper carried the very pertinent subtitle : *La science n'a-t-elle pas de mémoire ?* A second potential benefit of studying the history of science may thus be that it helps to save energy.

Historical insight will also protect us against overconfidence in scientific viewpoints, and against scientism, the idolatry of science. History demonstrates clearly how yesterday's scientific truths become the half, the three-quarter or complete untruths of today. How then can the individual or society entrust his or its fate without any reserve to scientists ?

The same historical insight shows that the development of science is a history of people, within well-defined socio-cultural contexts and with their *grande* and their *petite histoire*. And people are but people and human, *allzu menschlich* would be Nietzsche's grumbling comment, hence... In my most misanthropic moods, I sometimes declare, supported by what I know about the history of science : there are as many robber knights among people in science as among the rest of the population.

Robber knights then with diplomas, written on parchment made of an ass's skin as is ironically claimed in the Lower Countries. Such a special hide is certainly more deceptive than the sheep's clothing of the bad wolf, however sly the latter may be.

And if society knew more about the story of scientific praxis, perhaps laymen would not so easily rake up time and again the myth of researchers as lonely, heroic fighters and that tenacious stereotype of the mad professor. And perhaps, would people in science itself not be seduced so easily by what I call polarization : we, the coming young men with brilliant new ideas against the elders of the fossilized paradigm. Am I exaggerating ? If so, blame it on the textbooks teaching the disciplines with which I am acquainted. Many of these books stage cardboard heroes, as the American palaeontologist Stephen Gould calls them, in their historical introductions. Is this because the authors are lazy ? Or is it rather because they cling to romantic scenarios which tickle their narcissism ?

You have heard it : I am suspicious. Very suspicious, especially since I think I once observed how a prominent scholar studied the history of his field with great seriousness, aligning and confronting himself with famous predecessors; the exercise convinced him that he would be lifted into the pantheon of scientific cultural heroes. He made me think of that lady in the car, who forgot about the function of her rear view mirror and who sat and admired herself in it. No doubt, the foregoing is a sexist remark and therefore I better come to a conclusion, be it trite.

Research concerned with the history of the various sciences is important for society, especially now that scientific results tend to have a greater impact on society. Such research, however, is not an easy undertaking. It presupposes historical insight and great sensitivity for changing social mentalities, and knowledge of the discipline being investigated. The professional historian is often scared away by the latter and the scientist, not trained in history, by the first. Moreover, he often lacks time, since he is supposed to do "more useful" things, whatever that means.

Dr. Leguebe is among the exceptions who found the courage and the time to explore the past of their chosen field. He focused, among others, on the British naturalist Edward Tyson (1651-1708) and his book *Orang Outang sive Homo sylvestris*, that can be regarded as the foundation of comparative primatology. Other topics drawing his attention include : the introduction of statistical methods in physical anthropology; the establishment of the various societies promoting the discipline; the history of the classification of human races; how the 19th century reacted to the discovery of fossil man; the history of physical anthropology in Belgium. This short list must suffice, since Dr. Leguebe himself will report to you on his endeavours : *De la paléontologie humaine a la paléoanthropologie*.

Monsieur Leguebe, cher Colleague, je viens de tracer en vitesse votre curriculum vitae. Puis, je me suis permis quelques réflexions sur l'importance de l'histoire des sciences pour les scientifiques eux-mêmes et pour la société. J'ai terminé par la mention de vos travaux sur l'histoire de l'anthropologie physique. Je vous cède maintenant avec plaisir la parole. Cela évitera des répétitions et vous expliquerez certainement mieux que moi, ce qui s'est passé depuis Buffon et autres dans le domaine des sciences s'intéressant à la biologie de l'homme, fossile et actuel.

Thank you all for your attention.