

LAUDATIO GASTON VAN DE WALLE

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Who considers the life and work of our colleague, Gaston Van De Walle, cannot but conclude that he rightfully deserves the Sarton Medal. The dean explained in his introduction that this medal is a reward for scientists who have fought for the study of the development and history of their field. Gaston Van De Walle did this – and keeps on doing that – *par excellence* in the field of the economic science.

In this laudation, I will glance through the career of our former colleague Van De Walle. This is particularly interesting for those who have not known him as a professor, because his career is typical for a generation that is exemplary for the burgeoning democratization of higher education in Flanders.

Gaston Van De Walle was born in Ghent on the 25th of June 1923. He graduated as a primary school teacher, and later on he completed the lower level secondary school training. He studied languages in evening school and enrolled at university after World War II. He combined his studies with teaching. He graduated with great honor in 1948, and became teacher of commercial science. He got tired of this technical matters and started to take courses at the university. He graduated in 1953 in the complementary studies of economics. He started teaching in a secondary school, but was sent on secondment to Ghent University at the Seminar of Economics and International Economics (director Prof. Dr. M.A.G. van Meerhaeghe), and received his doctors degree in 1963 with the greatest honor. The subject of his thesis was the business cycle in Congo and Ruanda Urundi. His secondary thesis dealt with the attitude of the German social-democrats towards the Marxian doctrines. He started working at the University of Antwerp in 1964, and became censor of the Belgian National Bank in 1966. He was appointed parttime lecturer at Ghent university, and was appointed in 1968 as full professor at the University of Antwerp. Four of his former assistants in Antwerp are now professor at the University of Antwerp.

He resigned from his university tasks in Antwerp and Ghent in 1988, and quitted working in the National Bank in 1992, and started working parttime as advisor at the Institut Belge de Formation.

I will not irritate you by reciting the scientific publications of Gaston Van De Walle, because he has written plenty of them. On the contrary, I will point out some general features.

The research of Gaston Van De Walle was concentrated on three subjects:

The first and most important is his interest in the development of the economic science, the reason which we are here for. This interest hhad his "opus magnum" as a result. His "history of economic thought" counts nearly 500 pages. Furthermore, he wrote numerous smaller and more substantial studies on important and less important economists (for instance Marx, Vandeveld, Hilferdink, Enrico Barone, Friedman, Sismonde de Sismondi, Keynes...), and he gave lectures on regular basis on the meetings of the Society for the History of Economic Thought, that took place at British universities. It is important that he links the development of the economic thinking to the broader developments of society, and to the general developments in social and philosophical thinking. In his opinion, economy still is a very interesting social science, in which the views of society interfere with economic theories, an attitude he will certainly demonstrate again in his lecture. He possesses a great amount of erudition, a skill which is mostly lost nowadays. He has read the writings of almost every pioneer in economic sciences, often in the original languages and original edition. He did not confine himself to the writing of the pioneers, but read also their predecessors, who brought about the changes, and their epigones, who sometimes played an important role in the translation of the theories to society and in the alerting of policy makers. This was possible because Gaston Van De Walle possesses three rare qualities.

The most important of all is his patience. He is capable of reading in the confinement of his study or library, to contemplate what he has read before adding material of his own. Secondly, he has an exquisite sense of synthesis. Not everyone is gifted with the talent of expressing an economic doctrine with few words. He does what every important professor does with his students and society in general, he explains difficult topics in an easy way. Prof. M.A.G. van Meerhaeghe certainly contributed to this ability to summarize, since Van De Walle was his assistant for may years. You know, Gaston, we were both assistant to the same professor, I think you were the first to write you doctoral thesis under his supervision and I was the last. I could not find many names in between. It was very typical for our former dean that he encouraged his assistants to write

in a condensed manner. If, after doing your best to write as concise as possible, you presented him a two-page text, he crossed still half of it off. The syllabus and lectures of Gaston Van De Walle were hinge points in my formation as an economist. Arduous, but also very useful. Not only because they brought about historical insight; one who doesn't know one's history is like a traveler without a map, who cannot find the right way to the future. But Gaston Van De Walle was also the one who informed us on the most recent ideas in economics sciences. He filled in this way some hiatus in our curriculum. A third asset of our colleague is his encyclopedic knowledge. Through his study, he obtained a bird's eye view on economics, on her strengths and weaknesses. In that way, he could place developments in a broader historical perspective and estimate their importance.

The second subject on which he stresses in the economic and politic developments of the United Kingdom. He published on a regular base in "Economische en Sociale Berichten". Here we can see another person, someone who feels the pulses of society and who can explain the important and less important political choices that present themselves.

The third stress in his scientific work is his interest in corporatism. A scientific interest procreated by social motivations, he was an active member of the Socialist Party. He published some important articles on that subject.

You could perhaps conclude from this laudation that Gaston Van De Walle was a unworldly scientist. Without doubt he is a crammer, even a bookworm, but he was able to bias his activities by taken up important social duties. He was censor of the Belgian National Bank from 1966 till 1992, and for years he was a member of the Executive Board of the former RUCA, and finally, after retirement, he was ctive as scientific advisor of the Institut Belge de Formation.

Concluding, Gaston Van De Walle is an ideal candidate for the Sarton Medal, I am happy that the faculty followed y proposal to nominate him as one, and I am looking forward to his lecture.