

In Memoriam Werner Callebaut

Giovanni Boniolo

History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences

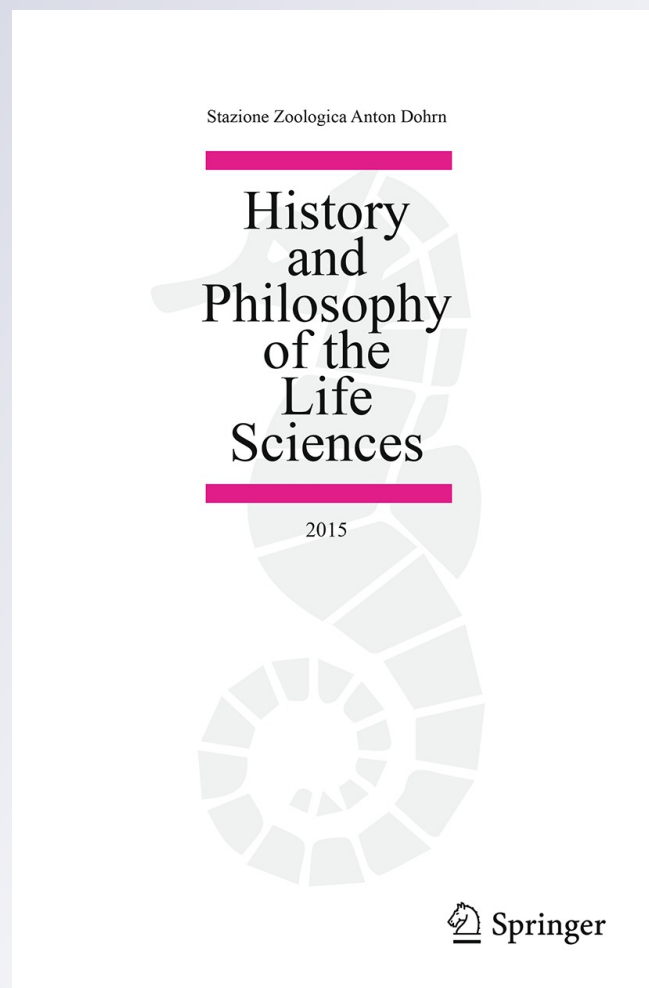
ISSN 0391-9714

Volume 37

Number 4

HPLS (2015) 37:474-476

DOI 10.1007/s40656-015-0084-8



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In Memoriam Werner Callebaut

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Received: 14 May 2015 / Accepted: 29 August 2015 / Published online: 8 September 2015
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Abstract The article contains some recollections on Werner Callebaut highlighting his personal character and his role in the community of historians, philosophers and sociologists of the life sciences. Werner Callebaut (1952–2014) was a real European philosopher. He was the Scientific Director of the Konrad Lorenz Institute for Evolution and Cognition Research (KLI, Klosterneuburg, Austria) and the President of the International Society for the History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Biology.

Keywords Werner Callebaut (1952–2014) · Leo Apostel (1925–1995) · Philosophy of the life sciences · Europe

Werner. Anytime I am thinking about you, I remember that delicious Calvados we had in a bistro in Paris, some years ago. Sitting at a table under the sky of a warm long Parisian night, we chatted about life and death, hell and heaven, promising each other to have soon another drink to “fire up” the same kind of conversation.

That was a drink that is still waiting for us, and that we cannot share any longer. But how many things we shared! In particular, our predisposition for good food and good wines. Do you remember the challenge you posed concerning Italian cheeses? And do you remember where I brought you to eat the dozens of different varieties of Italian cheeses? Do you remember that every course was served with a different wine (from an initial Prosecco to a final Amarone) and that every bottle was left on the table for us? Do you remember that, at the end of that glorious event, which

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would have deserved to be described by an ancient Greek poet, you declined a lift in my scooter and preferred to take a taxi?

On the other hand, I cannot forget your smiling face, but even the incredible capacity of organizing events without being stressed and without creating any friction among the participants. This did not mean that you were a malleable or compliant man. Not at all. Your friendly approach was accompanied by conceptual rigor, intellectual critical insight and organizational severity that sometimes forced you to blurt out sarcastic complaints addressed to senior or junior fellows who did not meet your scientific or “existential” expectations.

You did not like the approximations of many, whenever you were involved in an organisational activity.

You did not like the “arrogant-without-a-cause” colleagues that too often we meet around the world.

You did not like those who were speaking about philosophy of science (in particular, philosophy of the life sciences) without knowing science.

You did not like those who were without any awareness of the importance of the history of philosophy but conceited in their ignorance.

You did not like much of the contemporary philosophy of science, too often turned into a scholastic exercise.

Nevertheless, all of your intellectual idiosyncrasies were accompanied by your capacity of being amicable and amiable, of being loved by everyone. I never met, Werner, someone talking badly about you behind your back.

Always with your rucksack around the world to represent the beauty of the wandering of free thinking. Always losing something (a phone, a lap top, ...) during your trips, but always offering your enthusiasm to the people you met: undergraduates, graduates, less young and close-to-retirement researchers.

Yes, we spoke also about retirement. But it was unthinkable that you could have retired, because your philosophical, organisational, relational job was your life (and surely your life was not a job for you). It was unthinkable that the European community of the philosophers of the life sciences could miss you just for a trivial retirement.

How many times did we discuss the necessity to create a community of good young scholars also in Europe? Not in contrast to other communities, but to show that the seeds of the pre-World-War-II European philosophy of science were not lost forever. Maybe it was the influence of your old mentor, Leo Apostel (1925–1995): a Belgian philosopher from whom you learned the relevance and the necessity of interdisciplinarity, especially between natural sciences and humanities. Maybe it was your training in a moment in which European philosophy was not yet going towards complete homogenization and compartmentalisation. I do not know. But I know how much you, man belonging to that world, have also been a man of tradition, a man with an identity. You knew that identity means tradition, and that tradition does not mean conservatism.

You were in touch with hundreds of scholars around the world. I was always surprised by the thickness of your address book. Usually a man with too many relationships is a man without his own soul. This did not happen to you. Your soul was much greater than your address book. Anyone for you was the only one.

Anytime I had the fortune to meet you I had the impression I was your best friend, but you were the best friend of anyone, because you had a great heart. Not the material heart that betrayed you, but the immaterial and precious heart of your humanity. You will be always with me, Werner.