

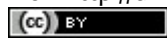
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Obituary

François Delaporte (1941 - 2019)

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On the 28th of May, the French philosopher and historian of sciences, François Delaporte died in Amiens at the age of 78. He was an emeritus professor at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne (UPJV). His death is an irreparable loss to the philosophy and historiography of the sciences.

The initial trajectory of François Delaporte did not follow the traditional path of a philosopher in France. After completing his high school studies, he was accepted to the *École de Beaux-Arts* in Paris in the early 1960s with the intention of becoming an architect and following his father's, Edouard Delaporte, footsteps as an architect, painter and sculptor.

The 1960s marked a profound philosophical renewal and innovation that would predominate French intellectual life. Authors like Claude Lévi-Strauss (*La pensée sauvage*, 1962), Louis Althusser (*Pour Marx* and *Lire le capital*, 1965), Michel Foucault (*Naissance de la clinique*, 1963; *Les mots et les choses*, 1966), Jacques Lacan (*Écrits* 1966), Jacques Derrida (*La grammatologie*, 1967), Gilles Deleuze (*Différence et répétition*, 1968; *La logique du sens*, 1969), as well as others, radically transformed the image of thought and understanding. Philosophy ceased to be an exclusively academic affair and reached the general public via mass media, which had an enormous impact and repercussion on culture and knowledge.

After reading these works, Delaporte was intellectually excited and influenced by this philosophical environment. He immediately decided to leave the *École de Beaux-Arts* and enroll in a philosophy course; however, he did not turn his attention to Marxism – as was prevalent at that time. Later in 1966, he enrolled in the philosophy program at the Sorbonne to further his studies in the history and philosophy of sciences. The Sorbonne University housed the *Institut d'Histoire des Sciences et Techniques* (IHST), which was directed by Georges Canguilhem since 1955. The IHST was created in 1932 by Abel Rey, a professor of history and philosophy of science at the Sorbonne. Rey directed the IHST until Gaston Bachelard replaced him in 1937. This Institute was essential for the institutionalization and renewal of the history of science in Europe. Generations of historians and epistemologists received their training and formation there, where its institutional and intellectual approach was a decisive feature and strongly focused on philosophy. The history of science in France at that time was institutionalized as a philosophical discipline, and this would not be

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indifferent as to how researchers like François Delaporte thought of this history. From 1966, Delaporte began to regularly attend Canguilhem's courses, and soon after in May of 1968, he began his master's studies under his professor's guidance. Two years later, he presented his master's dissertation, on issues surrounding the notion of vegetality in the eighteenth century.

Delaporte then started to work on a doctoral thesis (*troisième cycle*). Georges Canguilhem, however, could no longer advise him, since he would retire in 1971, so Canguilhem asked Michel Foucault, who used to attend the *Institute* and was elected at the end of 1969 to be the chair of the History of Systems of Thought at the *Collège de France*. Canguilhem had not only been Foucault's teacher, but had also advised his doctoral thesis on the history of madness in the Classical Age. At the time, Foucault was interested in the theme of sexuality, and Delaporte's research project proposal on the history on the concepts of vegetal sexuality pleased him – if I am not mistaken, this was the only thesis Foucault ever advised.

Early in 1976, Delaporte defended his thesis entitled *Les questions de la végétalité au XVIIIe siècle*. There was a noticeable shift concerning the original project. Instead of a history of the notion of plant sexuality, it became a study of “the historicity of a knowledge whose object is the very nature of the vegetable” and an analysis of “the practices” through which the objects of knowledge “are elaborated according to precise rules” (Delaporte 1979, 205). The emergence of a “problematic” around “vegetable issues” is of the utmost importance because, as we know, before Lamarck, there was no definite criterion for indisputably distinguishing animals and plants (Delaporte 1977, 49-59). It is not, however, in the Classical Age that one should locate the birth of plant physiology belonging to nineteenth century biology. At the same time, it is a little bit surprising that the Classical Age, often described as the “period of representation”, based mainly on the taxonomic model derived from botany, finds in the case studied by Delaporte a great inversion. The study of the prehistory of plant physiology showed that knowledge of the animal provided the models of intelligibility of vegetable knowledge. In 1979, Delaporte published *Le second règne de la nature*. The title of the book was suggested by Foucault himself.

After defending his doctoral thesis in the “troisième cycle”, Delaporte participated in Michel Foucault's seminars at the *Collège de France* from 1977 to 1979. At that moment, he decided to write a thesis of doctorate of state [*doctorat d'état*]. He wanted to move away from the history of biology, and spend some time researching something related to the history of medicine. Foucault advised him and suggested at least three possibilities of research that included a study which became the subject of his analysis, the cholera epidemic of 1832 in Paris (Salomon 2012, 248-262). Foucault again agreed to advise him. Delaporte resumed, to a certain extent, the study of *Naissance de la clinique* at the place where Foucault had left it.

From 1971 to 1979, Delaporte worked as a technical collaborator of the *Centre National de Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS). During the academic years of 1980-1981, he worked as a guest researcher at the Department of History of Science at Harvard University with a grant from the Arthur Sachs Foundation. At Harvard, Delaporte was associated with Barbara G. Rosenkrantz and Everett Mendelsohn. It was at this institution that he was able to advance his project on the cholera outbreak of 1832. It was not just a matter of “restoring” the stages of history to a precise epidemic outbreak. The purpose of his study was to research this phenomenon from the medical practices mobilized during the epidemic outbreak and to understand how the working classes and medical theories were put to the test by the events of 1832. This episode was a decisive event that radically transformed the history of medicine.

Thanks to the use of registration methods and statistical notation, the “analysis of the conditions of existence” of the population became the “central problem” (Delaporte 1990, 177). Within the history of this epidemic emerged the theme of society's medicalization and the normalization of the popular classes. “The population and the environment were then

judged according to certain standards of life and health” (Delaporte 1990, 177). Delaporte describes this process as the constitution of biopolitics, a political medicine, and a government of the people and their first medical dispositifs (Delaporte 1990, 65). At the beginning of 1984, the first version of his *doctorat d'état* thesis was ready. The doctorate of state was, however, finished in France that year, so this work moved away from its original proposal. Foucault, who died in June of that year, still had the opportunity to read it. In 1986, it would be published in English under the title, *Disease and civilization: The cholera in Paris, in 1832*, with a preface by Paul Rabinow.

In 1982, Delaporte went to Mexico where he remained until 1989 as a visiting professor at the Institute of Historical Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). The years he spent in Latin America led him to reflect seriously on the need to constitute singular objects of research in this new field of work. Latin American medical thinking was confronted with questions and problems of orders different from that of Europe. It was necessary to realize the uniqueness of this history. Instead of merely studying the spread of bacteriology outside Europe or dealing with general public health issues in different Latin American countries, Delaporte looked for singular events, “disconcerting stories” (Delaporte 1999, 183), unprecedented encounters of medical thinking with problems that marked and deeply reconfigured the history of medicine. For Delaporte, the history of medicine is always the repetition of difference. Hence the importance, in his works, and their use of the archaeological and epistemological analyses (and their transformations) of the fields of knowledge. The image of medicine that emerges from the Delaportian historiography is not homogeneous, uniform, or standardized, but plural, multiform, and surprising. For Delaporte, an archaeological and epistemological analysis inevitably provides a greater complexity of the history of medicine.

Published in 1989, *Histoire de la fièvre jaune: Naissance de la médecine tropicale* was the first result of this effort. A new form of knowledge and medicine was born from the moment the vectors became the object of knowledge, and its role in the transmission of certain diseases were defined. From then on, new disciplines could be configured, such as in experimental parasitology and medical entomology.² Through a series of unprecedented procedures put into action, the very definition and scope of epidemiology had radically been transformed. However, it was not a matter of saying that through the revelation of a complex set of interactions between microorganisms, hosts, vectors, the environment, and man, the invisible had finally become visible. The birth of tropical medicine implies a transformation of the very field of visibility of medical thinking. It would not be exaggerated at last to say that Delaporte founded in this book, what we might call retrospectively, a global history of medicine. Only an accurate historiographical perspective could reconstitute and establish a set of relations not admitted by his contemporaries and ignored by medical historians among research carried out at one point in China, Cuba, and India. In 1990, *Histoire de la fièvre jaune* was awarded with the Prix Medec for its contribution to the history of medicine. In 2013, Gérard Jorland defined this work as one of the two most essential books on the history of medicine in the last 50 years.

Ten years later, in 1999, Delaporte published *La maladie de Chagas: Histoire d'un fléau continental*. Again, it was “the history of a meeting between Brazilian medical thinking and an insect” (Delaporte 1999, 17). It was no longer Central America, but South America, a history of a series of medical research studies being done in Brazil and Argentina. From the history of an epistemological problem: if the Brazilian doctor Carlos Chagas had even discovered the “disease” that bears his name, why did it take almost three decades for it to become a “continental scourge”? In order to deal with this problem, Delaporte describes the constitution of an episteme from 1909: definition of an object, formation of a concept, and elaboration of a theory. With the work of the Argentinian physician Cecilio Romaña, from the

² On the birth of medical entomology, see (Delaporte 2009, 101-131).

1930s onwards, there was an epistemological transformation in this field of knowledge, that is, a profound epistemic reconfiguration of what had previously been understood as Chagas' disease. A transformation of the object of medical knowledge makes it possible to understand this time span between Chagas and Romañá. His effort in *La Maladie de Chagas* was precisely to reconstitute the historicity of this object. In this book, perhaps more than in any other, Delaporte explains his way of conceiving the history of medicine. The object of the history of science, he affirms, "is the never foreordained historicity of what men do in order to be able to speak about things" (Delaporte 1999, 20). It is a history of practices that make certain types of discourse possible. Hence, his refusal to accept as "data" the objects of the history of the sciences. Some of his critics did not understand the kind of historical thinking that was at stake here.³

In 1989, Delaporte returned to France intending to establish himself institutionally. Until 1993, he worked on several specific projects through temporary contracts. He was a guest researcher at *Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale* (INSERM) and the Natural History Museum in Paris as well as a fellow of the National Center of Letters and the Medical Research Foundation. He also worked at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) as *chargé de conférences*. Through a project funded by the *Association Française Contre les Myopathies* (AFM), Delaporte began to research the history of the knowledge of muscular affections. In 1998, he co-authored the *Histoire des myopathies* with Patrice Pinell. In 1995, Delaporte fulfilled a publisher's request to publish a short book entitled: *Les épidémies*, after the *Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie* conference on the history of epidemics in Paris. The book is a history of the "attitudes towards collective pathological phenomena" (Delaporte 1995, 8), from the Renaissance to the modern bacteriological and epidemiological revolution.

Delaporte never lost contact with his former teacher from the Sorbonne. Georges Canguilhem, who had already prefaced his book on vegetality in the eighteenth century, also wrote the preface for his *Histoire de la fièvre jaune*. During the years that Delaporte was outside of France, they regularly corresponded. On his return to France, Canguilhem entrusted him with the manuscripts from the period in which he wrote his thesis on *Le normal et le pathologique*. For editorial reasons, it was not possible to publish this book in French, which only came out in English in 1994 with a preface by Paul Rabinow and a critical bibliography organized by Camille Limoges (Canguilhem 1994).

The book on the history of myopathy was the occasion of a meeting concerning the French physician Duchenne de Boulogne's work on the clinical applications of electricity – and what such applications made possible – by exploiting electro-muscular properties. With the work of this physician with whom Charcot called the "master", it became possible, for the first time, to deal with the problem of laughter, as Stendhal wanted, "in anatomy style, not academy style" (Delaporte 2003, 1). Until the mid-nineteenth century, no one doubted that the problem of expression of emotions had an anatomical origin. However, facial myology had hardly advanced until then. It was necessary to develop a technique and a method capable of apprehending the structure and understanding the function of the facial muscles, which could not be observed when they were dissected by a scalp. This became only possible with Duchenne de Boulogne's *Éléctrisation localisée*.

However, the *Anatomie des passions* is not restricted to a description of the distinctiveness of the anatomical-physiology of the facial muscles. It is an archeology of the knowledge of expression, resulting from the emergence of a new style of anatomy in the mid-nineteenth century. A fundamentally superficial knowledge: the emotions happen as a surface effect that are produced by muscular stimulation. For Delaporte, therefore, it is not in Descartes that there is a more significant event in the study of the problem of this locus of passion, but in Duchenne de Boulogne. With him, the relationship between physiology and

³ See (Delaporte 2009, 159-185).

psychology or between body and soul was radically altered. From Duchenne de Boulogne, there is no more emotion without skin, passion without a body. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the results of his research study would be presented at the *École Nationale de Beaux-Arts*.

More than three decades after leaving it, this nomadic historian of sciences returned to the *Beaux-Arts*, or more precisely to its archives, and then revolutionized the philosophical reflection of passion. In an erudite and eloquent way, *Anatomie des passions* articulated a transdisciplinary set of fields of study that were typically segregated in disciplines reserved for specialists: anthropology of body, art history, physics, medicine, photography, philosophy and aesthetics. This fruit of patient, meticulous, and gray work, was based upon original texts, many of which were largely unknown and neglected by the philosophers and historians of the passions, Delaporte recreated this field of study by showing the importance that figures – hitherto ignored such as Duchenne de Boulogne – had been apart of this history. In 2004, the *Société Française d’Histoire de la Médecine* awarded him with the book prize of the year.

In 1993, Delaporte became a professor at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne (UPJV). He lived with his family in Amiens, and was actively involved in university life. He was a member of the Board of Directors and the Council of the Doctoral School at UPJV. He was responsible for the research team in “epistemology, history of the biological and medical sciences” and later co-founded the “Center of History of Societies, Sciences, and Conflicts”, which was responsible for putting together a transdisciplinary team of historians, historians of sciences, physicians, and philosophers. Even after his retirement in 2010, when he became professor emeritus at UPJV, he remained active and worked on many projects. Of all the projects and meetings that were born there, I would like to highlight one that has notably marked his trajectory of work in the last decade and a half, his meeting with Bernard Devauchelle.

At the end of November 2005, the surgeon and professor at the UPVJ – University Hospital Bernard Devauchelle led, in Amiens, the team that conducted the first face transplant in the world. Certain ethics professors soon after attacked the need for this surgical procedure, and considered it irresponsible from the medical point of view as well as questionable from the moral perspective. The media widely reported this transplant at that time. In March 2006, Delaporte published an article that applied the philosophy and historiography of medicine to confront the criticisms raised by those who spoke in the name of morality (Delaporte 2006, 28).⁴ The repercussion of his response was significant in the public debate. Bernard Devauchelle did not fail to thank him publicly for what he called “the most beautiful response to criticism that could be formulated by the different media” against the first transplant of the face of history.⁵ The example of this meeting between the two teachers in Amiens on the frontiers of knowledge – Devauchelle participated, years before, in the colloquiums that Delaporte organized on the history and philosophy of medicine⁶ – seems interesting because it brought together on the same front, the leading research in medicine and the history of medicine, medical knowledge, in the present, taking a step towards the unknown and defying its own limits, and the knowledge of the past of medicine understood as the history of an adventure, that is, of a *chéminement* toward a new realm of understanding with unpredictable risks. Here we can certainly observe the vitality and timeliness of an epistemological and archaeological history of medicine. This is a type of meeting that seems

⁴ Later, he would return to this problem in another work. See (Delaporte 2009, 77-102).

⁵ See: “Vivre avec un visage d’un autre”. *Identités. 8e printemps des sciences humaines et sociales*. Université de Lille, 11-31 mars 2016. <https://live3.univ-lille3.fr/video-recherche/vivre-avec-le-visage-dun-autre.html>

⁶ In 2000, “The enigmas of the face”, and in 2004, “The unthinkable and the unthinking”.



to characterize the work of this nomadic historian of sciences, of this *epistemigrant* of knowledge and wisdom.

Delaporte and Devauchelle organized several transdisciplinary colloquiums around issues that approached medicine and history of medicine, which they turned into a book in the years that followed. In 2010, they presented *La fabrique du visage: de la physiognomonie antique à la première greffe* (Delaporte and others 2010). In 2015, *Transplanter: Une approche transdisciplinaire: art, médecine, histoire et biologie* (Delaporte and Others 2015). These books bear witness to the vitality of the Delaportian approach I mentioned above. It allows, for example, to inscribe the disconcerting novelty of Devauchelle's surgical gesture in history, that of the "factory of the face", "from Duchenne de Boulogne to Devauchelle d'Amiens" (Delaporte, Fournier 2010, 8).

It should be worth mentioning here that there were two other collective projects in which Delaporte participated. He was one of the editors, in 2004, of the *Dictionnaire de la pensée médicale*, directed by Dominique Lecourt. This reference book for the history and philosophy of medicine brought together more than 200 authors of diverse nationalities contributing hundreds of entries. Delaporte himself personally wrote eighteen articles for this dictionary. More recently, in 2015, he was responsible for the critical edition of *Naissance de la clinique: Une archéologie du regard médical*, for the first volume of Michel Foucault's *Oeuvres* published by Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.

Delaporte also published two books that gathered a sparse set of texts published over the years. In 2002, *Filosofía de los acontecimientos – Investigaciones históricas: biología, medicina, epistemología* was published in Colombia with a preface by Alberto Castrillón Aldana and compiled texts published between 1977 and 2000. In addition to the specific epistemological problems addressed in the texts, this book brought together a series of Delaporte texts on theoretical, historiographic and methodological questions related to the history and philosophy of science for the first time. Prefaced by Emmanuel Fournier, in 2009, Delaporte published *Figures de la médecine*, a book that gathered the result of an unprecedented set of investigations into the history of medicine (on the history of blood transfusion, rhinoplasty, birth of medical entomology and Robles disease), a combative text about the facial transplant, and a historiographical text in which he challenged criticism of his *La maladie de Chagas*.

Delaporte worked on several other projects, such a history of organ transplants and on a history of artificial fertilization in collaboration with his dear wife, Cecília Delaporte (Delaporte, F.; Delaporte, C. 2004, 481-488). For more than two decades, along with all the research and projects I mentioned above, Delaporte worked on a history of vivisection. The outline of this project most likely emerged at the time of his research on the history of knowledge of expression. It was not a history of animal experimentation, from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, and the discoveries that were made possible by it. His objective was to understand the reasons that transformed vivisection, in the eighteenth century, into a philosophical, political, and epistemological problem.⁷ The history of a "big division" in Western culture. From Vesalius at the end of the seventeenth century, the vivisectionist practice developed unnoticed and without posing any problem. This changed radically in the next century. "In the eighteenth century, the will to end vivisection is the expression of an intolerableness within Western societies: the torture of the condemned generates a problem" (Delaporte 2015, 1). As always in Delaporte, it was a question of a problem: "Why we need to wait until the eighteenth century for philosophers, not the less important ones, to start defending the animals?" (Delaporte 2015, 3).

At the end of 2017, Delaporte delivered two conferences in Brazil related to this investigation. The first of these was entitled "The Anthropology of Vesalius" and the second,

⁷ Delaporte presented on several occasions the partial results of this investigation. See, for example, (Delaporte 2015, 1-30).

“The Questions of Experimentation in the Classical Age”. At the beginning of this second lecture, he joked – as he used to joke – that the title chosen for his presentation was too academic and that the book he was working on would have a more agreeable title: “History of Vivisection in the Classical Age: Essay on the threshold of intolerances”.⁸ There is not solely a history of man’s attitudes towards animals, but also the relations between men and beasts and, consequently, of man’s relationship to himself. A history of the invention of sensitivity before animals. At that time, Delaporte said he would need one to two years to complete his book. Unfortunately, death took him before he could complete it.

In addition to the books and projects I mentioned above, François Delaporte has written hundreds of articles and book chapters. He was a member of the French Committee on the History and Philosophy of Sciences, and a corresponding member of the International Academy of History of Sciences. His books and works have been translated and published in several countries. He has been a visiting professor at numerous universities around the world.

He was a tireless, extremely disciplined worker. His workspace was in the mansard roof of his house, which he had converted into an office. Bookshelves took up most of the space on the walls with numerous books and folders neatly arranged and sorted according to the themes of his research topics. Except for one wall, where one could read Jacques Prévert: “Mangez sur l’herbe / Dépêchez-vous / Un jour ou l’autre / l’herbe mangera sur vous” (Eat on the grass / hurry up / One day or the other / grass will eat on you). In the middle of the office, there was a large drafting table, in which he worked as an architect on his books. From the window of the mansard roof, there is a little back garden of the house, where one could see the beautiful city of Amiens, and its main historic buildings. So as not to get away from work, he slept right there, close to the ideas and texts that he worked on day after day. He never left his ideas and writings, they always accompanied him. Delaporte worked seven days a week. His intellectual journey began at 6 a.m. in the morning and lasted until noon. He would then take a “pause” from work and walk for an hour in the *Parc de la Hotoie*. However, he kept working. He carried a notebook with him to record the ideas that came to him during his walk.⁹ He did not doubt the importance of body movement for getting ideas flowing. In this way, he was a Nietzschean. In the afternoon, he would resume work until dinnertime. A regulated and disciplined life was, for him, a determinant of intellectual work. Deleuze said that a man who works hard lives in absolute solitude. Not sad loneliness, but a solitude populated with ideas, concepts, stories, problems, epistemic adventures. “A multiple solitude, creative” (Deleuze 1992, 51). In a radio documentary produced by France Culture, Delaporte was rightly presented as an “ascetic” leading a “monastic life”, totally devoted to intellectual work. He was not a simple “teacher” of philosophy and history of the sciences. His life was the philosophy and history of science.

⁸ In November 2017, François Delaporte gave a series of lectures for the Graduate Program in History at the Federal University of Goiás (UFG) in Brazil. His first lecture was entitled “Anthropology of Vesalius”, the second, “The Questions of Experimentation in the Classical Age”, the third, “Georges Canguilhem and the History of Sciences”, and the last “A History of the Philosophical Notion of Being in the true [être dans le vrai]”. The last two conferences took place in the framework of a colloquium on Georges Canguilhem. All of these conferences – except for the latter – are available on YouTube in Spanish: <https://youtu.be/oBlzncJgVC4>.

⁹ See: “François Delaporte: vie monastique, pensée en mouvement”. *France Culture*, L’atelier de la création, December 19, 2013. <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/latelier-de-la-creation-14-15/francois-delaporte-vie-monastique-pensee-en-mouvement>

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