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Etienne VAN DE WALLE 1932-2006

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Etienne VAN DE WALLE

1932-2006

Etienne van de Walle died suddenly in his office at the Population Studies Center in Philadelphia on 21 March, shortly before his 74th birthday. He was a leading personality of international demography, one of those rare researchers who built bridges between demographers from three continents – Europe, North America and Africa – and who developed very special relations with his colleagues in France, and those at INED especially.

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After obtaining a degree in economics at the University of Louvain, Etienne van de Walle spent four years (1957-1961) conducting socioeconomic surveys in Ruanda-Urundi, at that time under Belgian rule. This experience was to lay the foundations for his future, both by fuelling his interest in the African continent and by progressively focusing his attention on population questions. The second defining moment of his career was in 1961-1962, when he followed a demography course at the Office of Population Research in Princeton. Ansley Coale quickly spotted his particular talent and his exceptional human qualities, and from 1962 to 1973, Etienne van de Walle occupied a number of research positions at the center, continuing to work on Africa while developing a new interest in historical demography. He was to become a linchpin of the major project initiated by Ansley Coale on the demographic transition in Europe, and took charge of the volume devoted to the population of France (*The Female Population of France in the Nineteenth Century*) published in 1974.

In 1972 he became a professor at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He occupied this position until 2001, serving both as director of the Population Studies Center, and as Chairman of the Graduate Group in Demography. At that time, the University of Pennsylvania offered one of the broadest teaching programmes in demography, including Masters and PhD courses, and welcomed students from across the world, both from industrialized countries (Europe, Canada, etc.) and from the South. From 1980 to 1995, Etienne van de Walle also headed the African Demography Training and Research programme. His work often took him to Africa, notably to Mali where he was advisor to the newly-founded Institut du Sahel. In 2001 he was named Professor Emeritus of the University of Pennsylvania and continued to pursue his research activities.

As mentioned above, his earliest research concerned the demography of Africa, with a first series of articles published in 1960-1962 in the journal *Zaire* and in *Recherches économiques de Louvain*. From 1965, his articles featured in the most prestigious demographic journals, including *Population Studies* and *Demography*. In 1968, he contributed to a collective work coordinated by William Brass et al. (*Demography of Tropical Africa*), which remained a key reference in the field for many years. In the 1980s he co-edited four books in the *International Studies in Demography* series published by Oxford University Press, and wrote numerous articles. His strong interest in African demography accompanied him throughout his career.

Etienne van de Walle was also an authority in the field of historical demography. Following the publication of his book, he became a recognized specialist of French population history. He was also interested in the demography of Belgium, and in particular of his home village, La Hulpe, whose registers he analysed in detail. His attention progressively focused on the origins of fertility decline, and on the methods used by couples to prevent births. He reread, and sometimes translated, the earliest written documents on this question, and carefully explored all possible sources – including electronic ones – to bear out his view that the role of traditional methods, before the diffusion of modern birth control techniques, was generally under-estimated. One of his last articles, published in *Population & Societies* in December 2005 was entitled “Birth prevention before the era of modern contraception”.

In these two areas of research, Etienne van de Walle always adopted a highly critical approach with regard to data sources, and warned against over-standardized methods and over-hasty comparative analyses. With regard to nuptiality in Africa – one of his favourite fields – he showed for example that marriage is often a multi-stage process that cannot be summed up by a single date and age.

Born in Belgium, Etienne van de Walle settled in the USA in 1961. He nevertheless remained strongly attached to his European roots and had many friends in France and Europe. In 1975, he translated into English (with Elisha Renne) the demography manual written by Louis Henry (*Population. Analysis and Models*), and in the early 1980s, he prepared a new English version of the United Nations *Multilingual Demographic Dictionary*, based on the French text drafted by Louis Henry. In 2002, when the English version of *Population* was launched, he readily agreed to serve as Associate Editor, and the journal editors are extremely grateful for his valuable assistance. Over the last six months, he also contributed to the English texts of *Population and Societies* posted on-line on the INED website. In mid April he was scheduled to come to Paris to sit on a thesis jury.

Alongside his responsibilities at the University of Pennsylvania, he headed numerous working groups and training programmes in his many areas of interest. He was President of the Population Association of America in 1992.

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With his constant good humour, his intelligent wit, his courtesy and immense erudition, it was always a great pleasure to be in his company. Yet the last years of his life were saddened by the illness of his wife, Francine, who was not only his life companion, but also his research associate, notably in the field of African demography.

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To his children Dominique, Jean-François, Nicolas and Patrice, and to his seven grand-children, may we express our deepest sympathy. We would like them to know just how greatly their father and grand-father was respected and admired.

Henri LERIDON