
Jean-Pierre Bocquet-Appel and the "école française de paléodémographie"

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Abstract

Tracing the impact of Jean-Pierre Bocquet-Appel's work, in the different directions he has followed to reconstruct human demographic history from material sources, is not easy. We must first sweep the broad spectrum of his research; to probe the collaborations he has established as his problems evolve; appreciate the inventiveness deployed to solve this or that question; and (try to summarize in a few points what distinguishes his works, and those of French-speaking colleagues sensitized to the statistical approaches proposed, lines of research adopted in other countries (English-speaking in particular).

Thus, far from being a swansong, Farewell to paleodemography, published in 1982 with Claude Masset, is undoubtedly the key moment for the emergence of what I would call "the French school of paleodemography". This warning call, intended to draw the attention of the international scientific community to the statistical biases inherent in the estimation of age from biological criteria, did not have the desired effects and led, on the contrary, to a partition of the academic world, according to a line of fracture marrying the linguistic borders. In 1996, the discovery of an impossible international dialogue led Jean-Pierre Bocquet-Appel to look at other parts of paleodemography, such as the spatial approach of prehistoric populations or the search for a "Neolithic demographic transition". Without sacrificing methods of estimating the age at death of an interred population. It will be necessary to wait until 2002 and the "manifesto of Rostock" so that the international community validates the demonstrations made some 20 years earlier with Claude Masset. At the same time, new collaborations and major discoveries have come to reinforce Jean-Pierre Bocquet-Appel's international renown and contribute to the dissemination of a mode of thought, certainly original, but always marked by Cartesianism.

The incessant back-and-forth between the four disciplines that sustain the work of Jean-Pierre Bocquet-Appel - archeology, bio-anthropology, demographic and statistics - gives them an originality like no other. Methodologically, invariants guided his work and those of all his colleagues who, in conscience, adopted them. They characterize, in my eyes, the specificities of the French school of paleodemography: a requirement of reproducibility of studies, at all stages of work; taking into account the characteristics of pre-industrial (and pre-transition) populations; the development of synthetic indicators, derived from archaeological or osteological data, able to account for certain demographic parameters; and estimating the uncertainty of the measurement.

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