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Foreword to the XVII UISPP Congress Proceedings Series Edition

Luiz OOSTERBEEK
Secretary-General

UISPP has a long history, starting with the old International Association of Anthropology and Archaeology, back in 1865, until the foundation of UISPP itself in Bern, in 1931, and its growing relevance after WWII, from the 1950's. We also became members of the International Council of Philosophy and Human Sciences, associate of UNESCO, in 1955.

In its XIVth world congress in 2001, in Liège, UISPP started a reorganization process that was deepened in the congresses of Lisbon (2006) and Florianópolis (2011), leading to its current structure, solidly anchored in more than twenty-five international scientific commissions, each coordinating a major cluster of research within six major chapters: Historiography, methods and theories; Culture, economy and environments; Archaeology of specific environments; Art and culture; Technology and economy; Archaeology and societies.

The XVIIth world congress of 2014, in Burgos, with the strong support of Fundación Atapuerca and other institutions, involved over 1700 papers from almost 60 countries of all continents. The proceedings, edited in this series but also as special issues of specialized scientific journals, will remain as the most important outcome of the congress.

Research faces growing threats all over the planet, due to lack of funding, repressive behavior and other constraints. UISPP moves ahead in this context with a strictly scientific programme, focused on the origins and evolution of humans, without conceding any room to short term agendas that are not root in the interest of knowledge.

In the long run, which is the terrain of knowledge and science, not much will remain from the contextual political constraints, as severe or dramatic as they may be, but the new advances into understanding the human past and its cultural diversity will last, this being a relevant contribution for contemporary and future societies.

This is what UISPP is for, and this is also why we are currently engaged in contributing for the relaunching of Human Sciences in their relations with social and natural sciences, namely collaborating with the International Year of Global Understanding, in 2016, and with the World Conference of the Humanities, in 2017.

The next two congresses of UISPP, in Melbourne (2017) and in Geneva (2020), will confirm this route.

Introduction: A Message from the President

Emmanuel ANATI

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

The International Committee on the “Intellectual and Spiritual Expression of Non-literate Peoples” is conveying in its Session at the USPP Burgos Congress, as in previous occasions, experts from various disciplines to share experience and scientific approaches for a better understanding of the human creativity and behavior. Thank you for your active participation. Over 60 summaries, and 25 full texts of papers have been accepted. Participants include colleagues with different scientific concerns and specializations, from five continents. A stimulating dialogue is in progress by skype and internet.

Our committee is progressing in a joint effort of its participants, for a cooperation of different branches of the humanistic and the social sciences, aiming at building up a new kind of broad-minded study and understanding of the past. It is a sincere pleasure to welcome this courageous common effort. Prehistoric archaeology is in urgent need of this new landscape of “Conceptual Anthropology”, for a step forward. It is an important new academic approach for build up a solid future for the study of man.

In the last three generations, we have followed the tendency of some humanistic disciplines, in stabilizing conservative concepts, as a mean to preserve the past acquisitions and dictate the philosophical and ideological image of the discipline. Such trend creates a sort of mysticism of the discipline, a special glossary of conventional slangs, imposing a peculiar way of reasoning. This may turn out to become a handicap for innovation and progress. Each discipline has the tendency to find a comfortable refuge in its own ghetto. The spirit of conservation then favors the progress of those best integrated into the vernacular system. The obedient alumni are not necessarily the most brilliant ones. Such conservationism risks preventing new ideas and new concepts to compete with the old dogmas. Such a chain may have a negative effect on the progress of scientific research.

In each regime, to make a career, it is useful to be a “member of the party”. Academic regimes tend to follow the same trend. Conformism helps to survive though it does not help much in the progress of research. To avoid criticism, young archeologists and prehistorians prefer to remain descriptive, limiting new ideas that may displease “peer reviewers”. This is favoring mediocrity. For the advancement of scientific research, new ideas should have space: in any case, good ideas will survive while bad ideas will die. The debate will be the judge, rather than aprioristic dogmas.

Archaeology, both prehistoric and historic, needs a constant and open dialogue with other disciplines. The study of man includes anthropology, sociology, psychology, human geography, semiotics, art history, and other disciplines that have to join efforts. This is the aim of conceptual anthropology. Please join us in this effort.

For the last three generations the trend has been for researchers to be more and more specialized on limited research fields. Cultured humanistic formation has often been sacrificed, being replaced by specific technical knowledge. Rather than broadminded thinkers, this has favored the formation of technicians. They are welcome, as they are useful and needed, but it would be a dangerous dead end for the humanities if technicians would replace humanistic scholars and thinkers. Both have to coexist side by side, both being conscious of their task and role.

What is to be the image of Prehistoric and Protohistoric sciences in the future? Understanding the past is necessary to build a future. The knowledge of the past is the elementary base of culture. Even in the tribal world young people are being initiated to the knowledge of their past. Let us join efforts to develop public awareness, education, formation, engagement, research, for a broader understanding of our past.