
FOREWORD

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Laureate of the 2001 Francqui Prize

When I was first told that part of the Francqui Prize I was awarded in June 2001 consisted in organising a major international scientific meeting, three things were immediately clear to me about how I wanted to use this opportunity. Two of them worked out. The other one did not.

Firstly, there was no doubt in my mind that I had to organise something in the spirit of my work and by the same token in the spirit of the activities I have been organising at the Chaire Hoover since its creation in 1991. It had to be an encounter that does not talk about inter-disciplinarity but practices it. It had to focus on a problem whose discussion cannot help being naïve without the collaboration of philosophers, economists and other social scientists. It had to gather scholars who do not only have an expertise to share with others, but also an ability to really listen to colleagues with a very different background. And it had to use a format that would encourage such mutual listening and learning. Hence the pretty elaborate format of the conference, reflected in the structure of this book: each session started with the brief presentation to two pre-circulated papers, followed by an extended prepared commentary on both papers and a more or less improvised briefer intervention by a discussion launcher. What had to be avoided was a juxtaposition of clusters of scholars from the same discipline or from the same country talking among themselves. Hence the deliberate effort to have at least three disciplines and three countries represented among the speakers of each session. This worked pretty well, I must say, and I am most grateful to the fantastic set of people, speakers or not, from graduate students to emeritus professors, who made these intense two days an exceptionally successful interdisciplinary dialogue.

My second intention, by contrast, proved a total failure. When I was told the Francqui Prize had been awarded to me, I had just returned from teaching in Kinshasa. This visit to the Congo was one of the most overwhelming ones of my academic life, above all because of the mind-boggling gap I discovered between the size of the problems the country faces and the paucity of the intellectual resources that could be mobilised to tackle them. Given the role played by Emile Francqui in drawing the boundaries of the Congo as we know it — and hence in creating the responsibilities from which I realised, when I was there, that even forty years after independence, we cannot be regarded as discharged —, my first impulse was to pro-

pose to use the resources available to organise a conference in Kinshasa. But I was soon persuaded to abandon this idea, both because of the formidable logistic difficulties involved and because it would have been odd to interpret the Foundation's mission (the promotion of higher education and research in Belgium) so expansively that it would encompass the territory of Belgium's former colony. I then lowered my ambition to making room at the opening session of the conference for a presentation of its central theme in the context of the Congo. But after a promising start, even this proved impossible in the end, in part for logistic reasons of the sort that would have been nightmarish had the conference taken place in Kinshasa, in part as a symptom of the very problem I hoped the conference could do its little bit to address, namely the local lack of empirical knowledge and analytical tools that are required to produce work that would both fit into a conference of this sort and provide a useful background for designing intelligent policies.¹

I had far more luck with my third wish, which was to organise a conference on an issue I found both intellectually interesting and practically important, but on which I had not done a great deal of work myself. I have not lost interest in issues on which I have done a lot of thinking and working, for example those discussed in the set of critical essays on *Real Freedom for all*, including several by participants in the conference, that had just appeared at the time of the conference (Reeve & Williams eds. 2003). But I found far more exciting to gather people, including several previously unknown to me, around a theme that was fresh to me as a scholar, though not exactly as a citizen of Belgium, of Europe and of Brussels: the putative tension between on the one hand cultural diversity and its effective protection, and on the other economic solidarity and its sustainable institutionalization. To provide the conference with a clear focus, I formulated and circulated to all invited speakers and commentators the following background presumption: *Other things being equal, the more cultural (and in particular linguistic) homogeneity within the population of a politically defined territory, the better the prospects in terms of economic solidarity. Or, conversely, the more is done to preserve cultural (and in particular linguistic) diversity, the poorer the prospects, other things being equal, for a viable institutionalised solidarity embracing the whole population.* And I asked them to help us all think about the following three questions: (1) *Is there really such a trade off?* (2) *If there is one, what principles should guide us in the institutional choices to be made?* (3) *If there is one, what are the most promising experiments or proposals about how best to soften or handle it?*

The present volume contains most of the ingredients (in several cases, substantially revised afterwards) of our two days of

¹ To (try to) compensate, when I was invited, as a somewhat less direct by-product of being given the Francqui Prize, to set up an annual "Ethical Forum" on behalf of the University Foundation, I proposed as theme for its first edition the potential offered by the shift to electronic scientific publishing for free access to knowledge in the higher educational institutions of the less developed countries — an issue whose crucial importance for developing countries my visit to the Congo made me acutely aware of. See <http://www.universityfoundation.be/>, and Van Parijs (2004).

intense joint thinking around these three questions. I certainly learned a lot from the encounter — including, in some cases, about how little was known, and in many cases, about how much I still had to learn —, and I hear other people did too. I wish to express my deep gratitude to all those who contributed, in very diverse ways, to the success of this exceptional interdisciplinary encounter: Crown Prince Philippe, who attended with great attention most of the sessions; Luc Eyckmans, executive director of the Francqui Foundation and Martine Steylemans, secretary, who were of great help from the earliest stage; Eric De Keuleneer, executive director of the University Foundation, and his staff, who kindly hosted the event; my wife and children, who helped organise the memorable concluding party; Thérèse Davio, secretary of the Chaire Hoover, who master-minded the logistics of the conference and steered the present volume to completion; and all participants in the conference, whether paper presenters, discussants, discussion launchers, chairs or none of these, each of whom contributed in her or his way to the stimulating impact and friendly atmosphere of the event.

R E F E R E N C E S

- [1] Reeve, Andrew & Williams, Andrew eds. 2003. *Real Libertarianism Assessed. Political Theory after Van Parijs*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [2] Van Parijs, Philippe. 2004. “Les enjeux éthiques de la publication électronique”, *Louvain*, 146, avril 2004, 23-25.