

Academic presentation of Professor Amartya Sen by Philippe Van Parijs

**on the occasion of his being awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Faculty of Economic,
Social and Political Sciences of the Université Catholique de Louvain on the 9th of November
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by Philippe Van Parijs

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I was still a student when I first read some of Amartya Sen's work. I had come across by chance his little book *On Economic Inequality*, which I read at once from start to finish. It was for me what we call in French a *coup de foudre* - love at first sight, or at least at first reading. Never before had I encountered such a combination of a comprehensive and lucid survey of the literature; a sober and effective use of formal tools; a delightfully clear presentation of mathematical results; an unflinching critical attention to the presuppositions of what was being claimed; and a pervasive concern with the victims of the economic inequalities which the book sought to conceptualize.

Since reading Amartya Sen's little book, I have had some time to read widely. And for each of the features I just mentioned, I have probably come across some other writing by some other author that matched or came close to matching *On Economic Inequality*. But with one major exception, I have never since encountered anything like the same combination of features I had found so extraordinary in that book. I have to say "with one major exception", because I was unable to resist the temptation to read much more of Professor Sen's work, and thus underwent again and again the same gratifying experience I had gone through the first time I read him.

Needless to say, I shall not go here through the many books and articles that make up Amartya Sen's work. Even if I strictly confined myself to reading out the first word of each title, I think my time would be up long before I reached the end of the list. Let me just say a few words on two of Professor Sen's many achievements, the two achievements that have been singled out for the awarding of today's honorary degree.

1. Theory of Social Choice: turning bad news into good news

I cannot think of any discipline that started as badly as the theory of social choice. In 1951, Kenneth Arrow published a famous book containing a no less famous theorem which says, very roughly, this. Consider the problem of ranking various policies according to society's preferences. Let us try to do this - as no doubt one should in any decent liberal society - by using no other information than the preference rankings adopted between these same alternatives by society's individual members, and in such a way as to satisfy a small number

of very plausible conditions, which there is no time to spell out here. If we try to do this - this is Arrow's bad news. -, we shall necessarily fail. In other words, there is no way of aggregating individual preferences into collective preferences without violating at least one highly plausible requirement.

Faced with this result, one might have thought that people would have decided to give up and move on to some more promising business. But quite the opposite happened. Upon the shambles left by Arrow's theorem, arose a "normal science", in Thomas Kuhn's sense - an intense, tightly disciplined, cumulative, increasingly organized puzzle-solving activity - in an attempt, *inter alia*, to explore what happens if some of Arrow's conditions are relaxed; to prove ever more general, elegant and, if possible, counterintuitive results; and also to extend gradually the framework of inquiry beyond the ordinal-utilitarian framework common to Arrow and to standard welfare economics.

Many scholars all over the world have contributed to this vast enterprise, including several people present in this room today. But I think it is fair to say that the great architect of this whole enterprise, that the man who most contributed to consolidating a motley collection of results into a coherent, organized discipline, that the man who turned Arrow's bad, negative news into good, fruitful news, is none other than Amartya Sen.

This he has done in a number of ways, but in no way as powerfully as by providing the discipline with its first textbook. Nearly twenty years after its publication, despite the fast progress in the field and the appearance of several competitors, Professor Sen's *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* is still widely regarded as the best textbook on offer - a privilege it owes to its having all the virtues of a true classic: No fancy colours, no glossy diagrams, but a perfect balance between intuition and proof, a delightful combination of clear thinking and clear exposition, and a great gift for identifying the central problems and the most promising avenues for future research. One of these avenues he has abundantly explored in recent years and will take us to the second achievement I wanted to briefly mention.

2. The dialogue between ethics and economics: building bridges between two continents that had been drifting apart

As he has matured, Professor Sen has - like many great scientists -, shown a mounting interest in philosophical questions. But unlike many of these scientists, this interest has not led him to just allocate a growing share of his time to the sort of conversation previously restricted to coffee breaks and cocktail parties. As acknowledged by his recent joint appointment to Harvard's Economics and Philosophy departments, Professor Sen has moved into philosophy, in particular ethics and political philosophy, as a discipline in its own right, with its own demands, with its own tradition, with its own stock of increasingly sophisticated arguments and counterarguments.

By moving into philosophy in this way, Professor Sen has rendered, and continues to render, both disciplines a very precious service. For he is one of the very few people who are able to convey to economists, in a language they find congenial, those philosophical insights they would be naive to ignore in discussing even the most concrete policy questions. He is also one of the very few people who are able to explain to philosophers, in a language they can

understand, those elements of economic culture which they would be foolish to neglect even at the level of abstraction they enjoy keeping to. But being immersed in both cultures does not only make for an ideal communicator. It also provides an ideal position from which to contribute in a creative way to some of the most central questions of normative political theory. Let me just mention one of them, which has particularly concerned Professor Sen over the past few years.

When evaluating the performance of an economy or a society (in a broad sense covering both efficiency and justice), there are two metrics which are standardly used: the metric of goods or commodities, and the metric of welfare or utility. One uses the goods metric, for example when discussing performance in terms of aggregate real income and its distribution, but also in terms of John Rawls' primary goods. One uses the welfare metric, for example when discussing performance in terms of Pareto-optimality or in a classical utilitarian framework. Which of these metric is fundamental? Which of these metric captures what really matters, rather than just a proxy for it?

Amartya Sen's answer is: neither. The goods metric is fundamentally inadequate because it fails to take into account people's very unequal abilities to turn goods into what he calls functionings. (A disabled person cannot achieve the same as an able-bodied person with an identical quantity of goods.) The welfare metric handles this particular problem far better, but it is nonetheless fundamentally inadequate for different reasons. It amounts, among other things, to penalizing the poorest for adapting their ambitions to their fates. To quote from Professor Sen's most recent book:

"The hopeless beggar, the precarious landless labourer, the dominated housewife, the hardened unemployed, or the over-exhausted coolies may all take pleasures in small mercies, and manage to suppress intense suffering for the necessity of continuing survival, but it would be ethically deeply mistaken to attach a correspondingly small value to the loss of their well-being because of this survival strategy." (On Ethics and Economics, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987, 45-46)

A logically coherent, ethically defensible theory of distributive justice requires that one should reject both the goods metric and the welfare metric. What is the alternative? This question - central to both normative economics as it has developed in the wake of the theory of social choice, and to political philosophy in the liberal tradition - has been the topic of much of Amartya Sen's recent work. Those who have heard him this afternoon will know that his own answer is one which gives an irreducible role to achievements and freedoms, to functionings and capabilities. Whether right or wrong, this answer has stimulated and continues to stimulate many fruitful discussions by economists and philosophers alike. It thereby provides one of the sturdiest among the many bridges Professor Sen has built between two continents that were drifting apart, between ethics and economics. This was the second achievement I wanted to stress.

Let me conclude, Professor Sen, by mentioning two features of a more personal nature that make awarding an honorary degree to you at the same time exceptional and, I feel, particularly appropriate for our University.

Firstly, you are and have remained a citizen of the Third World. True, you have been coopted by the self-called First World through some of its most prestigious institutions - and it is probably fair to say that, had this not been the case, you would not be here today. But you have remained faithful to your origins to an extent seldom encountered with people in similar circumstances, not just by retaining Indian citizenship and by returning to India very frequently, but also by devoting part of many of your works and the whole of some of them to problems that primarily affect the Third World, in particular the most pressing of all, hunger and famine. Our University has a strong tradition of welcoming citizens of many Third World countries among its students. It is not unprecedented, but rare, and therefore particularly precious, for it to welcome one of them today as one of its Honorary Doctors.

The second feature is not altogether unconnected to the first one. When reading your work, when listening to you, one gets the feeling that here is someone who is just brilliant at what he is doing, but also someone who does not do what he does just for the fun of being so brilliant at it. As shown in the choice of his topics, in the very stamina that drives him along in his intellectual quests, here is someone who is impelled by something else, by what gives normative economics its point, by what gives political philosophy its urgency, by a concern with "the hopeless beggar, the precarious landless labourer, the dominated housewife, the hardened unemployed, or the over-exhausted coolies", and the many, many others who have to suffer the injustices of our world.

This aspect of your work was no doubt, among others, in Jacques Drèze's mind when he first nominated you for this degree. For our University, as you know, claims allegiance to a particular tradition. As is evidenced by the very choice of both Professor Aumann and yourself, this does not mean - or no longer means - bigotry, narrow-mindedness or religious sectarianism, in this department even less than in any other I know. What it means is, in part, commitment to an ethical tradition in which the concern for the least privileged figures prominently. This concern is one of the most central components of the particular version of the liberal tradition in economics and philosophical thinking that you are contributing so much to developing. Today is, therefore, a very special opportunity for our University to honour and reward a work that does not only display outstanding intellectual qualities, but is also driven by the very same ethical commitments that are - or should be - its own.

Hence I propose that Professor Pierre Macq, Rector of the Université Catholique de Louvain should confer on Professor Amartya Sen the Honorary Doctorate of the Faculty of Economic, Social and Political Sciences.