

CIDIC (EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR ECONOMIC, ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY) ORGANIZED A DIPLOMATIC, ECONOMIC, ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL MISSION TO VIENNA, 15-17 OCTOBER 2018, ON THE OCCASION OF THE AUSTRIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

# REFLECTIONS AND PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS BY JAN CORNELIS<sup>1</sup>

## PROFESSOR EMERITUS AT THE VRIJE UNIVERSTEIT BRUSSEL (VUB) AND ACADEMIC ATTACHÉ OF CIDIC

### CULTURE AND ART

CIDIC's mission offered the participants a once in a lifetime experience: an exclusive guided visit of the largest ever exhibition on Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It was held in Vienna's stunning Kunsthistorisches Museum in Maria-Theresien Platz which is still dominated by the impressive statue of the Mater Austriae.

"For Belgian academic circles, Maria-Theresa has left an important heritage. In the second half of the 18th century, Brussels and two thirds of the current Belgian state were in the hands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. "L'Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-arts de Belgique" was created in 1772. Still today, it is often referred to as "La Thérésienne". Unfortunately, in 1972 a split occurred and two equivalent academies were created, one for the French community (the continuation of "La Thérésienne") and one for the Flemish community. But, let us come back to Bruegel ... seventy five percent of Bruegel's paintings were brought together in Vienna to mark the 450th anniversary of the artist's death. The exhibition was co-sponsored by Flanders State of the Art, and our private visit was organized by David Maenaut, their Delegate for Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia.

Although the exhibition closed in January 2019, we can still explore Bruegel in hitherto unseen detail through the website, Inside Bruegel<sup>2</sup>, where details can be discovered that are hardly or not at all visible to the naked eye. Bruegel's humour is often hidden in details. The website also features new imaging techniques and physical testing methods for the analysis of paintings. These state-of-the-art scientific methods are the result of research in two Belgian universities, the University of Antwerp and VUB. The

website was made by Universum Digitalis<sup>3</sup>, a university spin-off launched in 2008 (VUB-ETRO). In my opinion, "science and technology research meeting the arts" should become a transdisciplinary domain that deserves to be structured in a way that ensures that scientific activity in this field transcends the occasional application of research results to pieces of art. Today the domain is largely unfocused, comprising many scattered talents in Belgium. Throughout its history, Belgium and, in particular cosmopolitan Brussels, was recognized as an excellent breeding place for artistic innovation. This is still the case today, and hence it is the ideal place to launch such transdisciplinary research that will most likely evolve to a new discipline of its own as in the cases of bioinformatics, climate studies, urban studies....

To illustrate the contemporary richness of the Brussels art scene, the Curator and VUB Professor Hans De Wolf (DW 56<sup>4</sup>) challenged the Berliner art scene: "Why Brussels is the new Berlin". In his 2017 exhibition "Gemischte Gefühle", organized in the airport buildings of Tempelhof in Berlin, works of young contemporary artists like Younes Baba Ali, Douglas Eynon and Roberta Gigante, ... were confronted



with icons such as Marcel Broodthaers, James Ensor and Francis Alÿs.

Analyzing Bruegel's paintings is never boring. Saints - if they appear in the paintings - are depicted as ordinary people participating in the everyday life of his times. Discovering the pictorial representation of Flemish idioms is great fun: "to be armed to the teeth, to bell the cat, to be a pillar biter, the herring does not fry here, to sit between stools in the ashes, it depends on the fall of cards, to fish behind the net...". These are but a few of them.

### INTERFACE BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND SOCIETY

Professor Lucas Zinner from the University of Vienna, a member of the UNICA<sup>6</sup> network, proposed the theme of "Responsible researchers for a globalised world" for our mini symposium. He argued that as globalization progresses, the politicians of nation states were increasingly losing power and influence. On the one hand, this was leading to fragmentation of societies and regional tendencies towards separatism. On the other hand, decentralized networks were gaining more significance.

In his view, universities and their scholars were global actors in their own right and were called upon by politicians and society to contribute to solving the grand challenges. However, scholars were not only researchers, but also teachers who bore a very important responsibility for the education of young people, the global citizens of the future. He asked how globalization affected their teaching? What role did they play in the context of globalization? Was it still legitimate for them to limit themselves to observation and research or should they play a more active, even more creative, role as global actors and commit to a specific position?

Five professors, three from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and two from the University of Vienna discussed the challenges of undertaking research on current social developments and what roles scientists played (and should play) in this. The opening statements dealt with tensions between values and the economy on the one hand, and with the possible, permissible or impermissible positions of scientists on the other hand. The presentations and subsequent discussion showed how academia could draw on its research to play a critical role in this public debate. The discussion emphasised that there is no one-size-fits-all model.



Professor Lucas Zinner, Jan Cornelis and the speakers in the symposium on Responsible researchers for a globalised world

Professor Koen Byttember, VUB, made a presentation on "The Values of Capitalism Questioned" He shared with us his historical perspective on the opposing forces of unbridled economic (neo)liberalism and the welfare state paradigm. Although he focused on presenting rational arguments, he went beyond observation and research, taking position in favour of the welfare state model, in which entrepreneurs are not necessarily the only societal heroes. Hereafter I paraphrase the main lines of reasoning developed during his talk and his subsequent interventions in the panel discussion: "Since the rise of economic liberalism in the 18th century, the values of "selfishness", "greed" and "egoism" have gradually claimed a central position in socio-economic thinking and behaviour. Various capitalist mechanisms based on these values have subsequently positioned capitalism as the current dominant economic system on earth. These mechanisms were typified by: (i) the prevailing monetary system, based on the power to create money that to a large extent was then handed over to private banks; (ii) the model of organizing enterprises through limited companies and corporations, supported by regulated financial markets, and (iii) the liberal and later the neo-liberal principles that gave greater value to business profits than the labour of hard working people, in other words, of the people themselves, in addition to (iv) various legal mechanisms, based on the liberal doctrines of freedom and equality, such as the right to voluntary association that forms one of the main legal building blocks of the capitalist economy.

In reaction to these developments, a number of initiatives were undertaken in the 20th century to counter (unbridled) capitalist practices. These gradually lead to the evolution - at least in some countries - of the so-called "welfare state model".

From the 1980s onwards, an economic ideology emerged which, even more aggressively than the earlier theories of economic liberalism, had attempted to reduce the entire world economy to one large "free market". These were the theories of economic neo-liberalism, a collective term for a variety of doctrines in economic thinking advocating "more (so-called) free market" and "less state". Such theories stood in opposition to mechanisms that attempted to establish a more just society than the one that resulted from a blind application of free market principles.

However, since then, the application of neo-liberal economics had taken a relentless rise, changing the appearance of the world more and more radically. More than ever before, humanity was in the grip of the values of selfishness, greed and egoism. As a result, the world was increasingly becoming one where only money counted and where the rich dominated. The question arose as to whether there was still anything to be done to counter this, and if yes, what."

Gunter Gaublonne, VUB, Director of the Brussels Diplomatic Academy, partner of CIDIC, spoke on "The role of economic diplomacy"<sup>7</sup>.

He argued that globalisation processes in recent decades have had a dramatic impact on governments' diplomatic activities. Academic research had underlined the importance of economic diplomacy in this context, with many countries across the world increasingly committed to its practice. Economic Diplomacy had become a vital tool to respond to potentially de-stabilizing developments such as shifting balances of economic power, international economic competition, lack of monetary stability, changing trade agendas (extended through services and IT products), and deregulation resulting from trade liberalisation. These international developments had contributed to an insecure, unstable and extremely competitive environment for companies which was forcing them to seek help from their governments to defend their international interests - that is, through economic diplomacy. For VUB's Brussels Diplomatic Academy this provided the basic rationale for setting up educational initiatives around economic diplomacy.

Professor Christian Göbel, University of Vienna, asked "What can the EU learn from China, and what role can China scholars play in the process?" In his short presentation, he argued that understanding political and social developments in China was not only relevant for those concerned with foreign policy or investment decisions but, more importantly, the development of China's

pragmatic techno-authoritarianism provided ample ground to reflect on our own democratic values, and the community we would like to live in. Surveillance technologies like facial recognition or the social credit system were a case in point: many Europeans were concerned about surveillance in China, but displayed little awareness about intrusions into their own privacy.

Professor Peter Schweitzer, University of Vienna, talked about "Knowledge Claims and the Responsibility of the Social Sciences: Reflections by a Social Anthropologist". He pointed out that the discipline of anthropology had a history of cultural relativism towards the local conditions in (what, at least, used to be) far-away places as well as a tradition of advocacy for the often marginalised social groups inhabiting these places. While the social and epistemological transformations associated with post-colonialism and globalisation had challenged these traditions, social and environmental disasters around the world had strengthened calls for a more engaged anthropology. This involved, inter alia, addressing issues such as "truth" and "objectivity" in so-called "post-factual" times. These questions were not only central for the conduct of social science but also touched upon the relationship between science and society more generally.

Professor Kim Van der Borgh, VUB, spoke about "Geopolitical Change and Economic Diplomacy: Competing Views and Values". He described how China and the USA were adopting quite different attitudes in positioning themselves in multilateral business systems. His talk highlighted how they were dealing with their business and trading partners, with what values and with what degrees of respect for human rights. I was astonished to see how intensely the audience interacted with the speakers as they discussed the roles of scientists and researchers in society. This is a subject that might divide the academic



community depending on the different universities' missions and the academics' personal attitudes towards research independence and objectives. Apparently, the topic also triggered reactions from the public at large.

Our discussion in Vienna showed that the university and the evolution of its governance policies in research, education and the creation of societal impact must be continuously re-invented, explained and discussed in wider circles. This rich experience in Vienna beautifully exemplified an important aspect of the new trend in "citizen science".

It was late in the evening when we arrived at "Zum Martin Sepp" for dinner. Darkness prevented us from appreciating the beautiful surroundings. It was also too late at night for Scientia Vincere Tenebras (conquering darkness by science), but, steeped in the spirit of camaraderie in the cosy atmosphere of the cellar in Zum Martin Sepp, the typical Viennese food delicacies and the cheery music conquered the darkness even better.

Jan Cornelis



Liberty.home team

- 1 A follow up article will appear in the next issue of Diplomatic World.
- 2 Inside Bruegel: <https://www.insidebruegel.net/>
- 3 UD: Experts in mobile media management and distribution - tailor-made solutions.
- 4 DW 56: "Interview with Hans Maria De Wolf, cultural nomad connecting people, changing minds" by Jan Cornelis
- 5 The theme of "Gemischte Gefühle" is inspired by the coexisting artist migrant population in Brussels, next to a population of migrants with tragic life stories and futures
- 6 UNICA: <http://www.unica-network.eu/> UNICA (partner of CIDIC) is an institutional network of 51 universities from 37 capital cities of Europe, combining over 160,000 staff and 1,900,000 students
- 7 According to Bouquin, the theories of economic neo-liberalism already date back to the years after World War II. (See Bouquin (2015), p. 88.)

## CIDIC INTERNATIONAL AWARDS 2018 WERE AWARDED TO

Liberty.home (<https://www.libertydothome.at/>). This is a social business which builds, distributes and promotes furnished micro-homes, with a modern look outside and a cozy atmosphere inside. Liberty.home addresses the problem of homelessness, providing a decent standard of living for people without a home. The company is gradually acquiring new markets, both in the sectors of B2B and B2C. It is a spin-off from a start-up service established on the FH Campus Wien. By selecting Liberty.home for its International Award-2018, CIDIC wanted to encourage "social" entrepreneurship and recognize the social impact of Liberty.home through its innovative home concept and business model. Shortly afterwards, in November 2018, Liberty.home also received the prestigious "Staatspreis-Patent 2018" presented by "Bundesminister Hofer" and "Patentamtspräsidentin Karepova".

B-LiFE (Biological light field laboratory for emergencies) which is a service integrating a deployable bio-laboratory with (i) analytical tools for rapid assessment of bio-threats present in the environment where the laboratory

is deployed and (ii) a set of space technologies improving the quality of service (e.g. satellite telecommunication, geo-localization, Earth observation for site selection and monitoring). It is designed for emergency response to medical, chemical and biological crises. B-LiFE receives information and field samples for in-the-field analysis. All relevant information (i.e. medical, epidemiological, biological) is delivered, with accurate geo-location information secured through an autonomous and robust satellite communication system. B-LiFE brings diagnostic capability as close as possible to the crisis area, thus providing an essential element for fast emergency response while preserving the safety of the deployed staff and the surrounding populations. B-LiFE is certified by the EU civil protection mechanism and has already been successfully deployed in the case of Ebola epidemics. Professor Roland Gueubel (Director of B-LiFE and a member of the Centre for Applied Molecular Technologies of the Université Catholique de Louvain) was presented with the award.

B-LiFE Deployment in Guinea  
<https://business.esa.int/projects/b-life>