Philippe Van Parijs is a Belgian philosopher and political economist. He studied philosophy, law, political economy, sociology and linguistics at the Université Saint Louis (Brussels) and the Universities of Louvain, Oxford, Bielefeld and California (Berkeley). He holds doctorates in the social sciences (Louvain, 1977) and in philosophy (Oxford, 1980). BxlConnect met with Philippe to discuss some of his views on Brussels, economics, philosophy and the impact languages have on shaping this international city.

Q. Your academic background contains a wide range of fields, in particular many philosophical and economic topics. What is the role of philosophy on economic policy making?

A. The economist John Maynard Keynes famously emphasized the power of the ideas of political philosophers, whether right or wrong. The world, he wrote, is ruled by little else. He may well be right.

Q. As both a philosopher and economist, what should the main role of governments be? How much should they interfere in the market and how should their performance be measured – GDP growth or citizen happiness?

My short answer to these great questions is that the aim should be neither to make our societies richer, nor to make them happier, but to make them more just. Both markets and governments have a central role to play in the service of this objective. But it is crucial that governments should determine the rules.

Q. You are one of the initiators of the “Marnix plan”. What is it?

A. The Marnix Plan is a collective initiative aimed at promoting the learning of languages among the people of Brussels, giving priority to French, Dutch and English while encouraging the transmission of all native languages.

Q. Why “Marnix”?

As an homage to Philippe de Marnix de Sainte Aldegonde, a Brussels-born 16th century humanist. He spoke seven languages and wrote books in three of them: French, Dutch and Latin — the English of the 16th century. In one of these books, he made the first known plea for the early and simultaneous learning of several languages.

Q. Why did you initiate the Marnix plan?

The impetus came from realizing the growing tension between two trends. On the one hand, triligualism with French, Dutch and English is becoming ever more important in Brussels, both in the job market and for the sake of connecting Brusselers with each other, with the two neighbouring regions and with the European institutions. On the other hand, the proportion of Brusselers who cannot speak either French or Dutch or English has increased from 2.5% in 2006 to over 8% today. If we don’t want unemployment to keep rising and the Brussels population to become hopelessly fragmented, we need to urgently develop competence in French, Dutch and English in all layers of the Brussels population.

Q. How will this goal be achieved?

A. Schools need to do a better job, especially the French-language schools, which cater for 80% of Brussels’ pupils. Most of these are still monolingual when graduating from secondary school. Dutch and English should be taught from an earlier age and in a more interactive way. There should be more collaboration with Flemish schools in and around Brussels. At the same time, the European school system should expand. I don’t mean that we should create yet another bunker school reserved for the children of Eurocrats. This would just perpetuate the current apartheid regime. One should rather develop so-called type II schools co-funded by “Europe” and “Belgium” at the kindergarten
and primary level, operating in several languages and open to all local children.

Q. Will this suffice?

A. Certainly not. In matters of language learning, one should not expect too much from school. The Marnix plan also wants to systematically promote the use of subtitling rather than dubbing in the media. It wants to help strengthen channels through which volunteers, especially retired people, can share their linguistic competence through conversation tables and the like. And it wants to disseminate knowledge among parents — especially those who have neither French, nor Dutch nor English as their native language — about what they should do and not do if they want their children to learn these three languages properly without losing the family language. Above all, the Marnix Plan wants to help propagate an attitude: speaking a language different from your mother tongue is not a treason to your own community, but a privilege, an expression of respect and an opportunity.

Q. Is it possible to help?

A. Certainly. The Marnix Plan has a website (www.marnixplan.org), where you can subscribe to its free newsletter and contribute to its forum. And any initiative that can contribute to the aim of making all Brussels trilingual+ can be mentioned on the website and in the newsletter.

Q. Why do you think English should be one of the official languages in Brussels?

A. In the first place, because it would make Brussels a better capital of the European Union. Over the last couple of decennia, English has emerged as the de facto working language of the European institutions and of the pan-European civil society that has been agglomerating around them. Many people arriving in Brussels because of its European function are already multilingual, with English in their repertoire but neither French nor Dutch. Administrative procedures and public communication in English would facilitate their lives, accelerate their integration and make them feel more welcome. In addition, English can be viewed as just a sloppily pronounced mixture of French and Dutch. Even when addressing Belgians, therefore, the use of English increasingly provides a handy compromise. Note, however, that I am not proposing to add an English version to the existing French and Dutch versions of each street name. A modicum of adjustment to the local languages won’t harm anyone.

Q. Do you think making English a “lingua franca” or a common working language would present a risk for cultural loss?

A. The learning of a common lingua franca is essential at the European level because we need a cheap and efficient way to communicate, coordinate, negotiate, cooperate and mobilize across borders. However, if there is a lot of contact between people with different native languages, there is a tendency for the stronger one, the one that is most widely known, to displace the others, at the expense of cultural diversity. The only way of securing the long-term survival of the weaker ones consists in protecting them through what is often called the linguistic territoriality principle. Coercive rules regarding public communication and public education make it realistic to expect from people who settle in a particular territory that they will have the humility and the courage to learn the local language. Those who choose to live in Flanders or in Wallonia must accept this.

Q. What about Brussels then?

A. Brussels is different, because of its European mission. But it is only because Dutch and French are protected in the neighboring regions that trilingualism French-Dutch-English is a realistic ambition for all those who grow up in Brussels.

Q. Many expats are working hard in Brussels and will eventually retire here. Will they face an "existential" problem which philosophy could help them overcome?

A. A very old philosophical lesson is that you must distinguish between things you cannot change and things you can do something about. Don’t waste your time complaining about the former: there are other cities in the world that have nicer weather and more majestic architecture, and your sense of belonging to a particular nation will never be quite the same as if you had stayed put where you were born. But whereas you’ll never be a Belgian, you can and must regard yourself fully as a Brusseler, with the corresponding rights and responsibilities. The Brussels population is now made up of a growing third of non-Belgians, a growing third of Belgians of recent foreign origin, and a shrinking third of Belgo-Belges. Healthy and competent retired expats must see it as part of their job to make their city a better city.

Q. Finally, to finish off with something lighter. As a philosopher, have you found out the meaning of life yet?

A. I’m not sure this qualifies as lighter, but the answer is positive and it can be short: hope. Note, however, that many of your hopes only have a chance of being realized after your death. It is therefore crucial to identify with one or more things that are much bigger than your little self: a family, a movement, a community — or indeed a city.