We reinitiate here the section “Pioneering Centre” appeared for the first time in our newsletter n°1 (in French). If there is a place in Europe that contributed a lot to explore further the interaction “philosophy-economics” in the last decades, the Hoover Chair of the University of Louvain (Belgium) may be that place indeed. For that purpose, a key role has been played by the fellowships of the Chair, from which scholars of many countries have benefited one after the other for more than twenty years. After their stay in Louvain, they often have proved to be valuable intermediaries to promote interest in the debate on issues of social and economic ethics. Many thanks to Philippe Van Parijs for giving us the presentation text² below.

“The Hoover Chair of economic and social ethics was created at the initiative of Rector Pierre Macq with a grant from the Hoover Foundation for the development of the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL)³ in 1991. The Hoover Chair was assigned two tasks: to stimulate ethical reflection in research and teaching at the Faculty of economic, social and political sciences of the UCL; and to contribute to a clear and well informed public debate about the ethical issues that arise in our society in the various areas covered by the Faculty's disciplines.

Gradually, the Hoover Chair has developed a number of mutually reinforcing instruments to achieve these objectives. From the start, a permanent Committee has defined its guidelines. This committee includes the head of the Chair, the dean of the Faculty of economic, social and political sciences and a representative of each of its departments. Over the years the Committee was expanded to include additional permanent members who joined the Hoover chair as well as by representatives from all the Faculties of the university.

From the start, the Chair’s activities have been announced in a printed newsletter published at the beginning of each semester, later combined with a website (www.uclouvain.be/chaire-hoover). In time the printed newsletter was replaced by an e-newsletter published about fifteen times a year (Hoover-Info, to which it is possible to subscribe on request to chaire-hoover@uclouvain.be).

The Hoover Chair itself organizes three types of activities:

- (1) Three times per semester, the “midi de l’éthique” (“noons of ethics”) brings together people, mostly teachers and researchers of the Faculty, with the aim to discuss (in French) a concrete and controversial question with two invited speakers.

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² This text is an updated (and translated) version of the presentation of the Hoover Chair, which was included in the volume published for the university of Louvain’s 575th anniversary (‘L’éthique comme engagement’ in Une aventure universitaire, G. Ringlet ed., Bruxelles: Racine, 2000).
³ In 1914, long before he became president of the United States, Herbert Hoover was a businessman living in London. From the outset of the First World War, he took to heart the plight of the Belgian population on the verge of starvation, as a result of German occupation and of the blockade imposed by the allied forces. With the support of the Belgian financier Emile Francqui, he aimed to provide (and to sell) food, which was greatly lacking in the occupied territory. At the end of the war substantial profits remained. Hoover and Francqui decided to assign to use these funds for the promotion of higher education and scientific research in Belgium. This financial capital was used to create the Hoover Foundation; the Francqui Foundation; the University Foundation (Fondation universitaire); as well as the Belgian American Educational Foundation.
- (2) Each Tuesday at 12.45 (if no “midi de l’éthique” is scheduled) the “mardis intimes de la Chaire Hoover” (or MiCH - “The Informal Tuesdays”) take places. Most members and visitors of the Chair, as well as others with an interest in the topic under discussion, attend this informal meeting. The short presentation by one of the members of the Chair or an invited speaker, defending a stimulating thesis with vivid examples, is followed by a lively debate (in French or English).

- (3) The Hoover chair organizes many workshops, often as part of specific projects (for example the Bernheim project “Social Responsibility in Economic Life”) or together with other research centres. These workshops, which are usually held in English, bring together speakers from many different disciplines with an interest in the same topic, both from Belgian and abroad.

Moreover, the Hoover Chair cooperates actively with the University Foundation, which shares the Chair’s origins in the Hoover Foundation. The aim of that cooperation is to organize two projects, gathering (in Brussels, using English as a language) scholars from all academic institutions in Belgium. The first activity is the annual Ethical Forum, first organized in 2002, aims to discuss challenges faced by (Belgian) universities in performing their mission to teach, to do research and to serve society. The second activity is the Re-Bel initiative (Rethinking Belgium’s Institutions in the European Context), launched in 2009, which organizes two public events every year and publishes a series of e-books based on the presentations at the events.

From time to time, the Hoover Chair also organizes exceptional events for a broader public. For example the Chair’s fifth anniversary (in December 1995) was marked by a big international symposium entitled “Repenser (radicalement) la solidarité”. The event marking the twentieth anniversary in November 2011, with the theme: “What can ethics do for economy and society? What can university do for ethics?”, drew a large audience. The twentieth anniversary also gave occasion to the publication of an edited volume that reflects the spirit of the Hoover Chair (Arguing about Justice, downloadable from the website of the Chair). In 2016, the Hoover Chair plans to organize an event on the topic “Utopies pour le temps présent” in order both to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Chair and to mark the 500th anniversary of the publication of the first edition of Thomas More’s Utopia in Louvain.

Finally, since 1995 the Chair offers a complementary study program in economic and social ethics, intended for graduates or students of any discipline who, to cite the brochure, “seek to find the right way to work and act in our society and in our world, while being consistent with their beliefs and behaving with a degree of awareness and lucidity but without any fanaticism or fatalism”. The courses for this program can be spread out over three academic years. They include a general course on economic and social ethics, courses in moral philosophy and political economy, an exercise course for the students of the program and a set of optional courses from other programs. Every year, the exercise course ends with a residential weekend in which members and visitors of the Chair participate as well. This weekend is usually experienced as the highlight of the year at the Chair Hoover.

In addition to activities organized at the UCL, there are countless others events organized by third parties, in Belgium and abroad, where members of the Chair are invited to participate - and participate as much as they can. These activities are sometimes academic conferences, but often they take place outside university circles, and range from the “fourth world” NGO “Aide à toute détresse” to the European Commission, from Baha’i movement to the King Baudouin Foundation’s program on Poverty and Social Justice. Other activities include forum discussions and interviews in printed or audiovisual media.
The topics about which members of the Hoover Chair are invited to think and speak are extremely diverse. They range from third world debt to the use of Internet, from the design of electoral systems to the financing of religion, from intergenerational justice to gender discrimination. Whatever the question under discussion, the “style” of the Chair consists in combining the critical tools that ethical principles offer with the formulation of radical proposals aimed at improving, in line with the principle, the present situation. This ‘style’ is promoted by the members of the Hoover Chair both through their acting in its spirit, as well as through their teaching activities. In this way, the Chair hopes to contribute to inspire and train a specific kind of “universitaires engagés”.

An ‘universitaire engagé’, in this sense, is the polar opposite of an obsequious scribe reporting to a religious hierarchy, a political party or a rich sponsor. (S)he is neither a friend of prejudices present in public opinion, nor a professional provocateur that enjoys nothing more than to create a sensation. An ‘universitaire engagé’ is someone to whom society gives the freedom, but also the responsibility, to say what (s)he thinks without indulging jargon or evading issues, to the best of their competence, in the light of value judgments they should not hide but on the contrary spell out frankly. It is someone who has the duty to say what (s)he thinks and why, especially when it goes against the grain, without passion or spite, with the formidable serenity they derive from the sincere, uncompromising search for what justice demands and what the truth commands.”

Philippe Van Parijs

Philippe Van Parijs has directed the Hoover Chair since its creation in 1991. The other permanent members of the Hoover Chair are Christian Arnsperger, Jean-Michel Chaumont, Thérèse Davio, Axel Gosseries, Hervé Pourtois and Yannick Vanderborght.

http://www.uclouvain.be/chaire-hoover