

European values and higher education today

Academic address at the opening of the 2016-2017 academic year

Esteemed guests

I am delighted to welcome you to this opening ceremony, which raises the curtain on a new academic year in the Antwerp University Association (AUHA). I would like to extend a special welcome to the many students who have chosen us, and who are standing on the threshold of a new life.

Even on a celebratory day like today, it cannot be denied: things are not going very well in Europe. The democratic model is under pressure. Terrorist attacks have become a scourge, while Europe appears to be incapable of finding a well-thought-out, humane response to the streams of refugees. Distinctions between 'us' and 'them' are intensifying, enabling the extreme right to reassert itself throughout Europe by appealing to white nationalism. At the same time, the European foundations laid down in 1945 are beginning to tremble.

The general situation in Europe resembles that of the 1930s, and it is causing us to consider more than ever before the question of who we are. Identity has grown into a paradigm through which we all look at the world.

When society is challenged in this way, the educational system is obviously affected too. Besides reflecting our society, the educational system provides a glimpse into the world we dream of, hope for and wish to become. It is no coincidence that the slogan of the University of Antwerp is 'Help shape the future' – but which future do we want to shape? Which future do we want to pass on to our young people?

We can only answer that question if we first ask: 'Who are we, and what do we stand for?' As the newly elected rector, I would like to share a few personal reflections at the opening of this academic year.

1. European identity, European values

1.1. Greece, Rome and Christianity

Any consideration of European identity inevitably leads to a historical account in which Greece, Rome and Christianity serve as the undisputed foundations of our modern society. But is that really true? Could it be that these ‘truths’ are mainly ideological and intellectual constructions? Do they actually reflect the core of our identity?

In 2015, I travelled through Iran. It was unforgettable. The image we have of that country does not correspond to reality as it is experienced there: friendly, hospitable people, and especially open-minded. I got to know a proud people who are now reaching back to their own language and history, reaching back to ancient Persia, an escape from the regime of the ayatollahs. As Hendrik Conscience put it in the 1840s, ‘We were a great people then!’.

In that beautiful country, I also saw traces of Darius, the progenitor of the Persian Empire, 2500 years ago now. For the Persians – or rather, the Iranians – it is as clear as day, and they are amazed if we don’t know: ‘Darius invented the Human Rights. You don’t know that?’

History is practised in two different ways: as science and as argumentation theory. The former is fine. The latter is more problematic, as it involves selectively digging up facts and claims in order to prove things. It is a bit like the oral arguments of an attorney, or a cookbook from which we select recipes we can use. In this context, history is used and – more often – abused, for example as a justification for claims to power or for identity construction. Even today, historical arguments are lavishly thrown around as we debate such phenomena as refugees, immigration or the latest geopolitical shifts.

In our identity story, when we look at this period, we refer not to Darius but to ancient Greece. ‘Democracy!’ I hear the political scientist proclaim. ‘Philosophy!’ I hear from another corner of the room. But we might ask ourselves whether parallels really exist between the ancient Greece of the sixth century B.C. and Europe as we know it today.

Of course, there are chains of knowledge that have been handed down across dozens of generations, meaning we can trace lines that are indeed centuries old. But allow me to make a few critical remarks about the Greece-Rome-Christianity knowledge line, which is supposed to have played such an important role in shaping our identity.

First, it is clearly a selective choice. If it is really about chains of knowledge, then why do we not learn that the Arabic world played a role of at least as much importance in moulding our civilisation? Via Spain and elsewhere, Arabs brought us mathematics and, more generally, a scientific approach based on physical observation of the world. Mathematics and the sciences have become incredibly important in our technological society.

Second, let us exercise more caution with causal connections. Just because the Greek city-state demonstrated an interesting democratic model doesn't mean that we adopted it from them, or that they 'invented' democracy. As rational beings, humans tend to behave similarly in certain contexts. Starting in antiquity you see cities developing everywhere, cities whose organisational structures differ enormously from rural areas and in which voice and shared power play prominent roles.

Similar systems can be found everywhere. The Roman legal system was of great importance in the development of the modern institutions in Europe. Studying this legal system can teach us a lot, but we should still ask ourselves whether we could have developed more or less the same institutions with no knowledge of the Roman legal system. The ancient Egyptians also had a reasonably rational legal system, as did the Phoenicians and other peoples. The 3800-year-old Code of Hammurabi, from Mesopotamia, is sufficient evidence that in ancient times, similar systems were evolving everywhere.

In our perception of who we are, Christian heritage is of unmistakable importance. It is also used as an argument in the debate surrounding refugees. Eastern European countries are particularly likely to play this card with flourish when arguing that non-Christian refugees do not belong here.

This pseudo-historical view of Christian heritage inevitably leaves us feeling uncomfortable. Until quite recently, Catholic society had held to a centuries-long tradition of intolerance – up to and including persecution – when it came to those with different beliefs. Anti-Semitism is just one example.

Nevertheless, we obviously prefer not to allude to such intolerance in the debate on refugees. But what, then, is Christian heritage? It has to do with a language of form.

We identify with the Gothic cathedrals of Seville, Antwerp and Krakow; with the Roman churches of Vézelay, Aachen and Budapest; with the Baroque palaces of Madrid, Berlin and Saint Petersburg; with music in the diatonic scale; with figurative painting and so on. It is a world that is familiar to us, one that we recognise and in which we feel at home. This is the world that we, white Europeans, consider 'ours', just as our travels to China or Iran take us to a world that feels 'other'.

This familiar language of form is no good argument, however, because the question of who we are cannot be answered by determining how we design buildings, make music or create images. In the debate concerning our European identity, we must determine how people interact with each other and how they develop (or not) as a result of these interactions. This is something very different.

The relationships between men and women; between parents and children, between fathers and mothers and their sons and daughters; how we treat the elderly; stand up for others; give our opinions; stand up for ourselves; take charge of our own lives; and so on. Taking all of this into consideration, society at the time of the Gothic cathedrals and 19th-century Baroque palaces is one – I hope – to which no one would wish to return.

Answers to questions about how we should interact with others, extend society and respond to today's big challenges need a more modern angle than Greece, Rome and ancient Christianity. We're talking about our roots, of course, but those roots don't always lie as deep as we might think. In the societal debate, therefore, let us embrace history dispassionately. Though we can never escape it, in our search for identity. All things shall pass, except the past.

1.2. Freedom and equality

The fundamental shift in our interactions with each other here in Europe was a slow and protracted movement that began in the second half of the 18th century, at the time of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, we have the traditionalist world – the most common form of society throughout the history of humanity. In this world, the past represents the normal way of doing things; it is against this norm that everything is measured. It is a conservative society, essentially static. In this world, it is 'human nature' to be unfree, and thus unequal, as humans are both bound to and members of a larger whole: the family, the extended family, the village or parish, the state. The community

thus takes precedence over the individual. In this world, authority is of great importance and should be exercised by an elite. In this world, religion often serves as the cement of the conservative philosophy.

This is not our world. It is the world of Muslim fundamentalism, yes, but it is also the world of pre-conciliar Christianity before the 1960s, the caste system in India and societies throughout Africa, Asia and so on. German National Socialism, too, was a variant of traditionalism in which nationalism could be seen as a laicised religion.

Nearly all societies are religious; this is how humans are. Religion itself is not necessarily a problem, and neither is an ideology that emphasises individual identity. The most important question concerns the amount of space we allow to the Other. Traditionalist societies can devolve into militant intolerance; in other periods, though, they may emphasise such values as respect and hospitality. And then we can learn a great deal from them.

In etymological terms, the traditionalist society can be contrasted with the world of liberalism. The liberalism we know now is a recent – or even very recent – development. It is a world of change and progress, in which the future, not the past, is the standard. This view of humanity proceeds from the freedom of the individual: all people are ‘by their very nature’ free and thus equal. In political terms, this means choosing a democratic model for society, including the separation of church from state, with independent research contributing to the shape of society, and with freedom of expression as the cornerstone. This is our world. It is a philosophy that has its roots primarily in the American and French revolutions of the second half of the 18th century.

1.3. Freedom, equality and... gradualism

Freedom and equality, certainly. But gradualism, too, is one of the foundations of the European democratic model. In the 19th century, freedom stood centre stage in the expansion of the modern state. In the 20th century, the focus shifted to equality. It was not until 1914 that Belgium introduced compulsory education, up to the age of 14. Suffrage was democratised slowly as well: first multiple and then singular; first men and then, in 1948, women.

In 20th-century Europe, the economic model of the free market was balanced out by the expansion of a re-distributed social security system. In this regard,

we differ sharply from the United States. The prosperity generated by this redistribution took shape within the context of national states, but this European country-based nationalism also escalated into the First and Second World Wars. This gave rise to the ever-important European unification, which was expanded after 1945. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this system has become increasingly troubled. Europe cannot escape its past – a past of countries and regions.

Have we forgotten too much of gradualism? Let us search cautiously for European political structures in which local autonomy is respected and valued more than it is now. To me, a Europe with two or more speeds seems inevitable.

Keeping gradualism in mind, let us also be patient when it comes to welcoming new groups into our society. Such a process calls for a long-term policy, driven by politicians who are willing to think from that perspective, and supported by knowledge and insight obtained through research and expertise. All this needs to be expressed through a well-thought-out communication policy which draws on media wisdom to ensure the building and maintenance of public support.

1.4. Freedom, equality and... humility

Freedom and equality, certainly. But also humility. As I said, general suffrage was adopted in 1948. But in the 1970s, I attended school in a boys-only class and a Scouts group consisting only of boys. We considered this segregated world quite normal. In the Flanders of that time, entertainment was mainly to be found in parish halls or, slightly camouflaged, in youth clubs, many of which had the same origins and in which the lights always flashed back on just after midnight – time to go home.

We didn't realise that all this had to do with an outdated societal model in which the avoidance of pregnancy was packaged in centuries-old, complex and diverse layers of culture that pervaded society, always returning to a single underlying principle: only in the context of marriage and family should boys and girls and men and women be brought together.

Today, we still haven't realised how big an impact artificial contraception has had on our society. It was undoubtedly one of the most important and farthest-reaching inventions of the 20th century. And it is no coincidence that traditionalists are most likely to oppose contraception, as it has been one of

the driving forces behind the emancipation of women. The same worldview means that higher education was and remains less straightforward for girls than for boys. Studying, too, leads to emancipation and self-sufficiency.

Forty years ago today, I entered the University of Antwerp to study law. In 1976, we didn't question the fact that only 30% of law students were girls. At that time, girls mainly studied languages, in order to become schoolteachers, although Art History was a respectable area of study too. Medicine and Pharmacy were also options, because they were helping professions, after all.

Until the 1970s, our marriage laws treated men and women differently. Until the 1970s, inheritance laws discriminated against natural children. Things were much the same in other countries. In the Netherlands of the early 1970s, gay men were still being subjected to chemical castration. The tide was turning, however. In May 1968, as a symptom of societal change, a largely pacifist student revolt took a stand against the old world and its outdated sexual morality.

One remarkable effect was that one of the last relics of traditionalism – the hierarchical model of the family under paternal authority – came to be replaced by an entirely new family structure based much more firmly on freedom and equality. Beginning in the 1970s, an educated mother working outside the home became a normal, widely accepted occurrence throughout all layers of society.

Since the 1970s, a major societal shift has taken place in Western Europe with regard to women's position. If there is one polarising global conflict today, one that appears to draw a line between the worlds of traditionalism and liberalism, then the relationship between men and women must surely play a role in this conflict – and what a role! It involves about half of society.

A timeline of change like this should lead us towards greater humility. In that regard, there are several points to consider in both politics and policy.

Armies that claim to export 'liberty and freedom' are often guilty of neo-colonialism. Shouldn't Europe adopt a more humble attitude towards the rest of the world? Iraq, Libya... A state structure can be blown away in only three months, but it could take 30 years to build it up again. And isn't it a bitter pill to swallow when we realise that displays of military strength are only used to serve our own interests – namely oil supplies?

The West is in need of a new international politics, one which looks more to gradualism and humility than is currently the case, and which exchanges the gigantic arms budgets and eager weapons trading for an economic model that centres around developmental cooperation. And in which the focus isn't only on oil-producing countries, but also on Africa, for example. In this globalised world, it is only the Mediterranean Sea – a mass grave of scandal and hypocrisy – that separates us from that continent.

Once again, though, here in Belgium and Flanders, we should accept that not everyone is running towards emancipation and individual freedom at the same pace. No two families are the same, and this is an area in which we should exercise restraint. We cannot emancipate women simply by forbidding them to wear headscarves. There are no winners in that kind of culture war, only losers.

Allow me to summarise. Freedom and equality derived from solidarity form the core of our society, but the societal model as we define it today emerged gradually. It is of very recent vintage. This alone is a reason to be a bit more humble.

Let's keep this in mind as we now turn to higher education today.

2. Higher education in the Antwerp region

During the recent rector elections, I suggested the following change to the first paragraph of the University of Antwerp's mission statement:

The University of Antwerp is a young, dynamic and forward-thinking university. Drawing on its geographical location, it is committed to building a democratic society by contributing to contemporary interpretations of liberty, equality and solidarity.

What do such 'contemporary interpretations' entail and, much more importantly, what could they entail in the future, not only at the university, but also at the university colleges of our Association?

2.1. The Association: Democratic and pluralistic, in the Antwerp region

Democratic. Everywhere in Flanders, higher education relies on what we all should be: players in a democratic field constructed around the philosophy of the Enlightenment. So let's state this more explicitly.

In its current form, we can talk about a pluralistic, open community, multi-cultural and even super-diverse, based on human rights. But it's also about an evolving image of humanity, as we have seen. For this reason, we openly discuss what solidarity actually means and where the limits of freedom lie, but it is not the foundations of ideology itself that continue to divide us. Those who study with us, those who work with us – they know what they are opting for.

A clearer profile would also enable us to better assess collaborative partnerships with educational institutions in countries that do not share our democratic context. Individual contacts and structural collaboration allow us to help and influence. For this reason alone we should be pragmatic, and we certainly don't have a monopoly on knowledge and wisdom. Just look at the many interesting collaborations with China, with its authoritarian leadership. It is and remains a delicate balancing act. If partner institutions in a particular country cooperate actively and intentionally in anti-democratic developments, a line has certainly been reached. In this regard, the Flemish universities are following the developments in Turkey very closely.

As the world becomes increasingly polarised, and as collective violence increases, universities should keep a cool head, bringing pacification through their long-standing role as *universitas*: centres of thought that engage in detached observation and independent – sometimes opposing – analysis, in search of structures that can bring people together.

Pluralistic. In Flanders, we are unique in this regard. The rigid social segmentation of the past has been smoothed out, in ideological terms, and it is mainly power structures that remain. Out of this rather mature reality, educational associations have sprung up throughout Flanders. Yet, their geographic dispersion has made cooperation quite difficult in some cases. To me, it seems only logical that educational organisations that differ substantially will only be able to cooperate efficiently if the people who work for them are also brought together.

Here in Antwerp, we stand for a pluralistic association of institutions that no longer march to the old beat of social segmentation. They are also located within easy cycling distance of each other, here in Antwerp's urban

environment. Such collaboration based on diversity is a strong concept that offers opportunities. The system of higher education in the Antwerp region could be a model for a new educational organisation in Flanders, one that could transcend the former social segmentation.

Cross-network diversity prevails in our Association, not only because of freedom of education, but also – and primarily – because it is so valuable. It is not only through emails and mammoth annual meetings that we get to know each other. It is pretty straightforward to see that we can collaborate in many areas. At the same time, because of our proximity to one other, the essential interdisciplinary expertise is encouraged and ignited internally, as it were. How different this is from the concept of monoculture, spread far and wide, preferably throughout all of Flanders!

This brings me to the third aspect: our special geographical location. The primary recruiting ground of every university and university college is of course the local region. Regional recruitment is also an exceptionally democratic educational concept. It's not only students from the Waasland-Antwerp-Kempen region that we aim to attract. The southern Netherlands is also an important target. It also seems to me that links between Antwerp and Rotterdam could offer strong prospects when it comes to research.

Our geographic position also allows us to look much farther afield. A recent OECD report on Higher Education and Regions provides a neat summary of this attitude as 'globally competitive and locally engaged'.

Let's now look at this in more detail.

2.2. Antwerp as a metropolitan region

2.2.1. Laboratory of the metropolis

Innovative pluralism is not the only feature that provides our association with a unique, recognisable identity. The Antwerp region has its own metropolitan characteristics, just as Brussels does. The metropolitan character of Antwerp also contributes to our identity. We are located in a multi-faceted urban network whose contours, while modest in size, match those of any 21st-century metropolis. In this, too, we have an important role to play, as the

metropolis is now, more than ever, the space in which the society of tomorrow will develop.

Our teaching, research and services to society are all taking shape, therefore, within the great laboratory that is Antwerp. Antwerp, with its significant cultural past, an engine of development and innovation, a crossroads, located in close proximity to an industrial web, with a large influx of migrants, a world-class port and much more. This is what the UN alludes to in the new Sustainable Development Goals: addressing global challenges from within the local metropolitan context, making use of the interdisciplinary potential of research and teaching at the local universities and university colleges.

2.2.2. Education in a metropolitan context

The educational programmes provided by our Association are geared towards the metropolitan context, as evidenced by the special attention paid to disadvantaged groups of students. We must support their entrance into higher education from a fundamentally democratic standpoint, with a view to attracting and guiding good students from all layers of the population.

Super-diversity poses an immense challenge. Here at our university and university colleges, young people from all population groups encounter each other. Getting to know each other better is the key to unlocking a world of understanding and respect.

After all, education is not only an instrument for knowledge transfer, but also a stepping stone towards cohabitation and a stimulus for individual development and emancipation. Higher education in our region has a crucial role to play in the emancipation of the many boys and girls with migratory roots. They are making a transition from a pluriform youth community that has a complex history to adult intellectuals who stand for tolerance and respect. In this complex movement, we must also have the necessary respect and patience for the difficult and delicate situations in which young people often find themselves. As we have already seen, emancipation is a gradual process.

The University of Antwerp makes substantial efforts for incoming students, with initiatives such as study programme counselling, tutoring services and language coaching. It is a policy priority to strengthen such initiatives even further. The university will accomplish this through the internal prioritisation of resources. In addition, however, we will also appeal to the appropriate minister for specific financing based on our metropolitan profile.

In its active search for an inclusive policy, our university can learn a great deal from the Association's university colleges: they have useful expertise. We must consult and collaborate more intensively with regard to curriculums, bridging programmes and supervision. In some cases, students can significantly increase their chances of success by transferring to the university from a programme at a university college. Conversely, university students can switch to university college programmes, if needed. It is a movement of mutual reinforcement.

Speaking of reinforcement, the metropolitan context alone has given all of the university colleges in the region an incentive to coordinate with each other. As an instrument of emancipation and community development, the efficiency of the region's system of higher education can only increase through close collaboration.

With regard to curriculums, I believe it is important to focus more on providing our students with the basic competencies needed in the modern world, always from a position of active, listening pluralism. There are forms of knowledge, insights and attitudes that all students should acquire, regardless of what courses they are taking, in order to strengthen them both professionally and as human beings. We could create a bundle of social-educational electives within the Bachelor programmes, for example 'Sustainability and Economics', 'Sustainability and the Environment', 'The Digital Society' (on information flows and public opinion) and 'Cultural Diversity'. We could also do more to encourage students to supplement their programme components with active social commitments.

In a world of increasing polarisation, teachers and lecturers – and others! – can also contribute to social cohesion in another way: by giving priority to moderate discourse rather than polarising analyses based on over-simplifications and generalisations. This is also the true calling of an intellectual: to analyse, to add shades of meaning, to call into question, to explore other approaches and to offer alternative directions. It is a critical mindset that we ourselves would like to employ actively, in all situations, and one that we would like to impart to our students.

2.2.3. Research in a metropolitan context

The University of Antwerp has a strong research tradition which has been strengthened even further since the merger in 2003. In research, a policy

centred around ‘frontline’ domains is inevitable. We currently have nine frontline research domains in which, even though we are still a young university, we are a strong performer worldwide: imaging; ecology and sustainable development; drug discovery and development; urban history and contemporary urban policy; harbour, transport and logistics; infectious diseases; materials characterisation; neurosciences; and socio-economic policy and organisation.

These frontline research domains obviously overlap with each other, forming a complex interdisciplinary web. It seems to me that, in the way we profile ourselves, community development and metropolitanism could be seen as a sort of superstructure which, besides being a frontline research domain in itself, also serves as an interdisciplinary framework. We can reinforce this framework by encouraging collaboration among scientists across all domains.

Society can and should be guided by the results of fundamental research that has no immediate gain, but we can also work on more specific issues. Employment opportunities, housing, healthcare, culture and communication, heritage, traffic, sustainability, the environment and other areas – researchers and lecturers from all disciplines can be brought together in this wide array of topics. In doing so, we should obviously work in an open atmosphere that places the same amount of emphasis on asking the right questions as it does on producing precise answers.

Encouraging interdisciplinarity also necessitates an emphasis on innovation. Just think about the Internet of Things, and Smart Cities, projects through which we – as a smart university – are doing our bit for urban development. The University of Antwerp wants to work with the region’s university colleges to make major contributions to innovative ways of shaping the modern city as an economic, social and cultural biotope in which people live together.

2.2.5. Closing thoughts

Community development is a permanently unfinished project that calls for concrete policy, here and now. The government plays a role in this, as do political parties. Yet policy alone is not enough. That’s why a strong civil society also remains active, in which volunteers, non-profit organisations and associations are engaged. But we, too, the partners in the Antwerp University Association, have and want a role to play.

Community development, in the broadest sense of the term, in a context of pluralism and respect: this is the strong central thread that can unite our students, researchers and lecturers in Antwerp – the city as a laboratory for the world of tomorrow.

If we do this convincingly, starting from who we are, here in Antwerp, the system of higher education in this region will continue to increase its international appeal. Our expertise in metropolitanism would then allow us to attract students and researchers from far beyond the region. Even when it comes to internationalisation, we have to start by thinking about our own profile.

We have a profile – we simply have to strengthen and expand it further. It is a project in which our students – Bachelors, Masters and PhD students – will play the leading roles. The world of tomorrow will mostly be shaped by young people, because they, more than the older generations, are inventive and creative, more motivated by a permanent desire to work together to build a better world.

I wish you all an enlightening and intense academic year.

Antwerp, 29 September 2016