Sociologica. V.19 N.3 (2025)
ISSN 1971-8853

For a Responsible Inexpertise: A Conversation with Philippe Van Parijs

Philippe Van Parijs* [a] Riccardo Emilio Chesta [b]

[a] Hoover Chair of Economic and social Ethics, University of Louvain (Belgium)
[b] Department of Electronics, Information and Bioengineering, Politecnico di Milano (Italy)

Submitted: July 22, 2025 – Accepted: October 19, 2025 – Published: December 22, 2025

Abstract

In this conversation, Philippe Van Parijs reconstructs his intellectual trajectory, which, starting from philosophical interests, gradually defined itself in an interdisciplinary program that combines political philosophy and the social sciences. His initial epistemological interests gave way to a focus more on issues of justice, discussing themes already present in Marx and Mill, but revisited in light of new debates. The interview also explores the evolution of the September Group's collective experience, leading to a discussion of the possibility and necessity of a professionally interdisciplinary way of doing social science today. On this last point, Van Parijs asserts the urgent need for academics to participate in public debate in the spirit of what he calls "responsible inexpertise", a way of avoiding both the fragmentation of knowledge and confinement to the ivory tower.

Keywords: Analytical marxism; Real utopias; September Group; Interdisciplinarity; Expertise.

* philippe.vanparijs@uclouvain.be

Riccardo Emilio Chesta: If we look at your background, what strikes is your interdisciplinary education and way of practicing political philosophy and the social sciences as if they were part of the same enterprise. How did you develop this specific attitude of being a political theorist and social scientist?

Philippe Van Parijs: Since I was a child, I was interested in history, which soon turned into an interest in politics. This led me to plan to study law, but when I was 16, I thought I should first get more clarity about the meaning of life. Hence, philosophy had to be given priority. To keep track open, I pursued three first degrees simultaneously at Université Saint-Louis in Brussels, now absorbed by the University of Louvain: philosophy, economic, social and political sciences, and law. For my master's degree at the University of Louvain, after some excruciating hesitation between economics and philosophy, I opted for philosophy. I concurrently completed, also at Louvain, a master's and later a doctorate that were formally in sociology, but enabled me to explore a wide range of social sciences, from sociobiology and diachronic linguistics to game theory. I got my doctorate in philosophy from Oxford in 1980.

My early work was in the philosophy of the social sciences, with one book in English based on my Oxford DPhil, *Evolutionary Explanation in the Social Sciences* (Van Parijs, 1981), and a collection of essays in French, *Le Modèle economique et ses rivaux* (Van Parijs, 1990). I found it very useful because it allowed me to travel through a variety of disciplines and equipped me with a broad social-scientific culture, which is still proving handy today. But I never wanted to remain stuck in the philosophy of science. My plan was definitely to turn to political philosophy.

Shortly after arriving in Oxford in 1974, I saw in a bookshop the new paperback edition of a book published three years earlier: *A Theory of Justice* (1971), by a certain John Rawls, of whom I had never heard. I put it aside to work on my two doctorates and, between the first and the second, to do a lot of economics, whether Marxian or Keynesian, neo-classical or post-Walrasian. It is only in the 1980s, after returning to Belgium, that I read *A Theory of Justice*, and turned to political philosophy. I edited the first French book on Rawls in 1984 (Ladrière & Van Parijs, 1984) and published a number of essays, most of which were collected in two volumes, one in French, *Qu'est-ce qu'une société juste* (1991) and one in English, *Marxism Recycled* (1993). All of this served as a preparation for *Real Freedom for All. What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?* (1995).

REC: You completed your intellectual education moving between Louvain, Oxford, Bielefeld, and Berkeley. In all these places, philosophy meant different things. How did you encounter and assimilate these different ways of doing philosophy? What were the reasons behind these choices of intellectual migration? What sources of curiosity and dissatisfaction pushed you to move?

PVP: When I arrived in Louvain in 1971, Gaston Bachelard was regarded as the top philosopher of science in the French-speaking world. He was seen as the mentor of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. However, Jean Ladrière, the philosopher who was to supervise my two master's theses and my Louvain doctorate, told me, "Well, Bachelard is interesting but he's not very rigorous. Why don't you rather read Karl Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959[1938])?" I read it and thought: "Finally a philosopher who writes clearly!" This was the beginning of my conversion to analytical-style philosophy, which made me cross the Channel three years later and spend years in Oxford as a sort of intellectual refugee.

REC: You became a philosopher, but you were also socially and politically engaged. This is also clear in your early participation in the so-called "September Group". How did you join this intellectual project that tried to reconstruct Marxism on very socially urgent and relevant issues, but on analytical philosophical grounds?

PVP: As someone who regarded himself as being on the Left, I found it important to read Marx. During the semester I spent in Bielefeld, my main achievement was to read *Das Kapital, Band Eins* in the German edition (1867), from the first to the last line. My doctorate on *Evolutionary Explanation* included a chapter on explanation in the Marxist tradition. My external examiner was Jerry Cohen, still at University College London at the time. I had met him before, shortly after my return from Berkeley to Oxford in 1978, in the context of a seminar he gave in Oxford, jointly with Charles Taylor, on his then forthcoming book *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Cohen, 1979). To my amazement and his, we discovered that we had developed very similar analyses of the nature of functional explanation, as well as a functional interpretation of the fundamental propositions of historical materialism. He and Taylor asked me to introduce the final session of that seminar. And that was the beginning of an intellectual comradeship and close friendship that lasted until his premature death.

REC: It's interesting to note that Charles Taylor, who has quite a different epistemological perspective on explanation in the social sciences, was holding a seminar together with Jerry Cohen. At least, it seems quite unusual in a world of intellectual wars where their traditions are interpreted as adversarial, or even opposed in a purely confrontational manner. But it seems that this seminar was also an experience of cross-fertilization, right?

PVP: There was a dialogue between different intellectual traditions. Charles Taylor had just published his book on Hegel — not exactly Cohen's cup of tea. But he had great respect for Jerry Cohen's rigorous reconstruction of Marx's thought. Personally, I found Taylor's intellectual style far less congenial than Cohen's, but I found his personality extremely congenial. In a way, part of my job has been symmetric to part of his. He took to heart to promote continental philosophy in an Anglo-American environment, just as I tried to promote the practice of Anglo-American-style political philosophy on the continent.

By the way, there is an analogy between this symmetry and another one that relates to one aspect of our respective social engagements. While Charles Taylor grew up in Montreal as a native speaker of both English and French, I grew up in Brussels as a native speaker of both French and Dutch. He resigned from his Oxford chair and returned to Montreal to help "reconcile the solitudes" — to use the title of one of his collections of essays —, to help build bridges and alleviate conflict between the Francophone and Anglophone communities of his native Québec. Analogously, I had never considered staying at Harvard or Oxford, where I taught for several years in the 2000s, despite friendly pressure from Amartya Sen in one case and from Jerry Cohen in the other. I felt that my place was in Belgium because of what I could hope to do there in order to reconcile our own "two solitudes". When I was invited to give the Charles Taylor Lectures in Montreal in March 2025, I chose "Réconcilier les solitudes" as the overall title in order to express this proximity.

To return now to your question about the September Group, the 1978 Taylor-Cohen seminar was the occasion of my first contact with a member of what was to become the September Group, namely Jerry Cohen. Around the same time, I was fortuitously put in contact with the other two initiators of the group. The American economist John Roemer, who was about to publish his *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Roemer, 1982), happened to be the referee of a rather technical article I published in the *Review of Radical Political Economics*.

And I was asked to review two books by the Norwegian philosopher Jon Elster.

The three of them invited me — along with sociologist Erik Olin Wright and political theorist Robert van der Veen — to join the first meeting of the group, which was held in the philosophy department at University College London in September 1981. The group was initially called the "No Bullshit Marxist Group" — an expression that I never liked, partly because I found it too arrogant and partly because I never regarded myself as a Marxist. So, one year, when I was the convenor, I proposed calling it "September Group", and the expression stuck.

What defined the identity of the group was a combination of two things: a commitment to social justice inspired by the Marxist tradition and other components of the more or less radical left, and an unapologetic use of so-called "bourgeois" intellectual tools, such as analytical philosophy, mathematical economics, game theory, empirical sociology, etc.

But the group was quite diverse. For example, Jon Elster left after about ten years because he found that too much time was devoted to utopian thinking in the group. Typical, in his eyes, was the discussion of unconditional basic income, which started with the draft of what Robert van der Veen and I would publish under the title "A Capitalist Road to Communism" (Van Der Veen & Van Parijs, 1987). In the same spirit, Eric Olin Wright developed a comprehensive programme of "real utopias". This was not at all to Jon Elster's taste. He preferred spending his Summers reading Montaigne, he wrote in his resignation letter.

REC: While not regarding yourself as a Marxist, do you have a use for the tools developed by Marx?

PVP: There are many insights in Marx that were useful and can still be properly "recycled". But I confess that I have always felt closer to John Stuart Mill — also in terms of temperament — than to Marx. Mill was an intellectual pioneer of both socialism and liberalism, but also of feminism and ecology. For example, there are some stunning passages in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) that advocate a "stationary state" and the preservation of wildlife. And his defense of freedom of speech in *On Liberty* (1859) is more relevant than ever.

REC: Would another September Group be possible in the current academic neoliberal conditions?

PVP: The September Group was born long after Friedman and Hayek published their most popular books and shortly after Thatcher and Reagan came to power. Part of Jerry Cohen's work and mine were directly motivated by the objective of providing a serious response to the strongest philosophical version of neo-liberalism: Robert Nozick's libertarianism. And the article "A Capitalist Road to Communism" opens with the sentence "Prospects for the Left look bleak indeed". So, the September Group could be viewed as produced by a context that was already neoliberal.

Whether another September Group is possible today is rather a question of whether a group of left-wing intellectuals can be formed whose members are both sufficiently close and sufficiently diverse to manage to interact in a fruitful way for decades. The group was strengthened by the cooptation of exceptional personalities, like Joshua Cohen and Samuel Bowles. It was livened up by inviting one or more guests to every meeting, such as Susan Okin, Nancy Fraser, Claus Offe, Fritz Scharpf, or Thomas Piketty.

After 44 years, the September Group is still meeting, but two of its founding members, Jerry Cohen and Erik Wright, have died, Jon Elster has resigned, and the other members of the older generation declared themselves "emeriti" in 2021. We are still invited to the meetings but left the running of the group to younger colleagues: Debra Satz (Stanford), Seana Shiffrin

(UCLA), Suresh Naidu (Columbia), Roberto Veneziani (Queen Mary), and others.

REC: Last question: You also worked on linguistic justice, and there is something about the specialization of scientific language that is worth discussing. What is your view — the view of a very interdisciplinary theorist working in very interdisciplinary departments of social sciences — on the state of contemporary social sciences? What is your view on a more and more technical and specialized way of practicing social sciences? Do you see any risk of fragmentation and potential solutions to avoid it?

PVP: Firstly, internationalization has connected people far more than in the past. A need has therefore emerged for scientific publications to be disseminated in a shared language, which has turned out to be English. The domination of English means, to some extent, the domination of knowledge produced in the Anglo-American world. In the social sciences, it often happens that you know more about the state of things in the US than in your own country. Moreover, there is a significant inequality at the expense of non-Anglophone scholars, who struggle to publish in international journals. The appropriate response, however, is not to whisper in our respective languages. No one can then hear us beyond our small community. English is a megaphone we must use, not to say the same things as Americans, but to use different methods, address different research topics, and give our own geographical spaces the attention they deserve.

Secondly, increasing importance has been given to publication records and objective performance indicators in the recruitment and promotion of academics. There is a positive side to this: objective criteria replace clientelism, nepotism, and arbitrariness. The negative side is that researchers are increasingly doing research primarily in order to publish rather than to find correct answers to interesting questions, with publications just being useful byproducts.

Thirdly, there is the segmentation of knowledge. The international scholarly community is widening, but the questions addressed by each of its members are shrinking. Many questions, however, require a multi-disciplinary approach. Migration, for example, requires the collaboration of demographers, economists, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, sociolinguists, etc., and not in the form of a juxtaposition of monodisciplinary monologues. This requires a permanent effort to phrase insights from our own disciplines in a language understandable by outsiders and a corresponding effort to penetrate the language of other disciplines.

Such a multidisciplinary outlook is not only required for the validity of much research. It is also required for effective participation in the public debate. As regards this important mission of academics, I have been advocating what I call "responsible inexpertise". Academics have a role to play in guiding public opinion and decision-makers by drawing on their own expertise, on what they can dare to say they know within the tiny domain in which they can claim to be experts. But it would be irresponsible to stick to that and let public opinion and decision-makers manage on their own beyond that.

Academics must supplement their narrow expertise with a critical synthesis of other relevant knowledge, with the help and under the control of their colleagues in neighboring domains and in other relevant disciplines. Moreover, they must not restrict themselves to stating what they believe the facts are. It is part of their role to stick their necks out, to say what should be done, on the basis of what they truly believe the facts are, not what they would like the facts to be, and of value judgements which, if they are not obvious, they should be willing to spell out and defend.

This responsible use of our academic freedom is more important than ever today. Aca-

demics must speak out beyond their narrow expertise, but without dilapidating the credit of academic institutions and thereby inviting brutal backlash. This requires being constantly on the lookout for sensible objections, conceding inconvenient truths and embarrassing uncertainties, refusing to indulge in wishful thinking, and addressing the public in a language it can understand. Not an easy job. But an essential one.

References

Cohen, G.A. (1979). *Karl Marx's Theory of History. A Defence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ladrière, J., & Van Parijs, P. (1984). *Fondements d'une théorie de la justice: Essais critiques sur la Philosophie Politique de John Rawls*. Louvain-La-Neuve: Diffusion, Libraire Peeters.

Marx, K. (1867). *Das Kapital. Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie. Band I*. Hamburg: Verlag Von Otto Meissner.

Popper, K. (1959). *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Abingdon-On-Thames: Routledge. (Original work published 1938).

Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Roemer, J.E. (1982). *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Stuart Mill, J. (1848). *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*. London, UK: J.W. Parker & Son.

Stuart Mill, J. (1859). *On Liberty*. London, UK: J.W. Parker & Son.

Van Der Veen, R.J., & Van Parijs, P. (1987). A Capitalist Road to Communism. *Theory and Society*, *15*, 635–655. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00239129

Van Parijs, P. (1981). *Evolutionary Explanation in The Social Sciences: An Emerging Paradigm*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield.

Van Parijs, P. (1990). *Le modèle économique et ses rivaux: Introduction a l'Épistémologie des Sciences Sociales*. Genève-Paris: Libraire Droz.

Van Parijs, P. (1991). *Qu'est-ce ou'une société juste*? *Introduction à la pratique de la philosophie politique*. Paris: Seuil.

Van Parijs, P. (1993). *Marxism Recycled*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Van Parijs, P. (1995). *Real Freedom for All. What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Philippe Van Parijs – Hoover Chair of Economic and Social Ethics, University of Louvain (Belgium)
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3348-1317 | philippe.vanparijs@uclouvain.be
https://www.uclouvain.be/fr/hoover/philippe-van-parijs
Philippe Van Parijs is Emeritus Professor in Economic and Social Ethics at UC Louvain (Belgium), known for his interdisciplinary work on the epistemology of the social sciences and in political theory. A prominent advocate of universal basic income (UBI), he co-founded the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) in 1986. He has held positions at institutions such as Harvard University and the University of Oxford. His books include *Real Freedom for All* (1995), *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World* (2011), and *Basic Income. A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy* (2017), with Yannick Vandeborght.

Riccardo Emilio Chesta – Department of Electronics, Information and Bioengineering, Politecnico di Milano (Italy)
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7962-1755
https://www.deib.polimi.it/eng/people/details/1935088
Riccardo Emilio Chesta is an Assistant Professor in Sociology at the Politecnico di Milano (Italy), where he is a member of DEIB–Department of Electronics, Information and Bioengineering, the META Unit–Social Sciences and Humanities for Science and Technology, and the NBFC–National Biodiversity Future Center. He's the author of *The Contentious Politics of Expertise* (2021).