



Philippe Van Parijs is a philosopher and a Brusseleer. He teaches at the Universities of Louvain and Leuven, and is a Robert Schuman Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence.



# PHILOSOPHER PHILIPPE VAN PARIJS PRESENTS THE AULA MAGNA MANIFESTO

In 1431, the City of Brussels offered the Duke of Burgundy to build, next to his palace, a large hall in which he could convene the *Etats Généraux des Pays-Bas*, one of the very first elements of democracy in our part of the world. This became the *Aula Magna*, the remains of which can still be visited under the *Place Royale*. Its erection was crucial for turning Brussels into the capital of the Low Countries and

*“With about two hundred nationalities and even more native languages, the Brussels population is exceptionally diverse. With more than a quarter of all Brusselers having lived in the Region for less than five years, it is also exceptionally fluid.”*



*The Aula Magna manifesto calls for the merging of all Brussels communes into one, with only one mayor governing the city, one city hall and one police force, thus further strengthening the Brussels identity for its residents.*

consequently, several centuries later, into the capital of the Kingdom of Belgium and next of the European Union.

In 2005, the name “Aula Magna” was adopted by a think tank aimed at discussing the future of Brussels, unconstrained by old cleavages. In December 2006, it was instrumental in launching, under the title “Nous existons/Wij bestaan/We exist”, a declaration signed by 10,000 Brusselsers, which called for the recognition of an inclusive, multicultural Brussels identity irreducible to the co-habitation of “Flemings” and “Francophones”.

In the same vein, it coordinated, in the spring of 2009, the trilingual Etats Généraux de Bruxelles, a major set of events that brought together the academia and civil society by way of scholarly presentations and public discussions about all aspects of Brussels life, from education and language policy to mobility and criminality.

This was followed by a series of annual “Brussels Summer Universities”, and now by the

publication of a small book, “Demain Brussels. Une vision pour libérer notre ville” (Politique, 2019), in which the members of Aula Magna’s core group sum up some central aspects of what they have been thinking about and are fighting for. The book opens with a brief collective piece that captures the spirit of Aula Magna – no doubt particularly congenial to many non-Belgian citizens of Brussels. Here it is.

## **BUILDING TOGETHER THE PEOPLE OF BRUSSELS**

Congested transport, massive immigration, eroded social cohesion, chaotic education, haphazard security, pollution of all sorts and an



*About 200 nationalities live in Brussels, making it one of the most diverse and cosmopolitan cities in the world. Many of its residents do not feel connected to the bipartition of Brussels between either Flemish or Walloon institutions, but rather to the city of Brussels itself.*

***“The Brussels identity will be one of a cosmopolitan city, marked by a diversity that is simultaneously an inexhaustible wealth and an ever-renewed challenge, capable of forward-looking patriotism that could not be more remote from backward-looking nationalism, united by the attachment to a territory, to symbolic places such as the Place de la Bourse, this Place du Peuple de Bruxelles where Brusselers of all colours and from all walks of life can gather in order to mourn as well as to exult.”***

unsustainable contribution to global warming: Brussels faces the same problems other major cities in Western Europe face. But in its ability to tackle them, the city suffers from one major impediment.

The vision that underlies many of Brussels’ institutions divides Brusselers into two tribes living side by side, each equipped with its network of

nurseries and schools, media outlets, cultural institutions and political parties shared with one of the neighbouring regions.

In the name of this vision, Brusselers are expected to assimilate into one and only one of these tribes and develop a common identity with either the Flemings or the Walloons. It is this vision that underlies the nationalist utopia



of the “condominium”, in which independent Flemish and Walloon nations claim the right to jointly manage Brussels on the assumption that one part of its inhabitants belongs to the *Communauté française* and the other to the *Vlaamse Gemeenschap*.

The demographic shake-up of Brussels since the beginning of this century has voided the plausibility of this vision. With more than two thirds of the Brussels population either foreign or of recent foreign origin and with Flemish schools filled with almost as high a proportion of pupils with French as their native language as French-speaking schools, the institutional bipartition of Brussels is increasingly disconnected from reality on the ground. Is there an alternative? Yes, there is: to build - and rebuild again and again - the People of Brussels.

Let's face it: this is no easy job. “This population of the capital is not a people,” wrote the Walloon Jules Destrée, “it is an agglomeration of mixed communities.” A century later, Flemish minister Jan Jambon agrees: “For me, the Brusselers are not a people, a nation. Brussels is a fragmentation of everything and anything.”

They are not entirely wrong. With about two hundred nationalities and even more native languages, the Brussels population is exceptionally diverse. With more than a quarter of all Brusselers having lived in the Region for less than five years, it is also exceptionally fluid. It will be no different tomorrow.

Turning such a population into a people in the sense of an *ethnos*, a monocultural community, is - fortunately - doomed to fail. But turning it into a people in the sense of a *demos*, a political community, without which there can be no democracy worthy of the name, is a difficult but essential and far from impossible task.

It is even already well underway. Many of those who feel bothered by cultural diversity have found refuge in Brussels' more homogeneous Flemish or Walloon periphery. By contrast, many of those who have chosen to come or remain are enjoying cosmopolitan cohabitation as part of their daily lives and are determined to make it a success.

In this context, countless cultural, urban and other initiatives involving Brusselers of all

***“This means merging the Brussels communes into a single municipality coinciding with the Brussels–Capital Region, with one mayor–president, one welfare office, one police force, one network of municipal schools and one city hall for all Brussels residents.”***

origins have forged links that will never dissolve. And the existence of a Brussels parliament and government with expanding powers has gradually created a political community with the capacity and responsibility to shape its future.

It is now high time to amend our institutions so as to strengthen this dynamic and thereby enable our city to address the challenges it faces in more effective fashion. This means merging the Brussels communes into a single municipality coinciding with the Brussels-Capital Region, with one mayor-president, one welfare office, one police force, one network of municipal schools and one city hall for all Brussels residents.

The comprehensive vision and unity of action that such a merger should bring about are perfectly compatible with neighbourhood schools, community policing, social assistance close to its beneficiaries and citizen participation boosted by decentralization at the district and neighbourhood level.

Along the way, voting rights at the regional level can be extended to the entire population of the City-Region, which will by the same token be able to free itself from the straitjacket of the two separate electoral colleges and thus allow multilingual lists, promote the formation of genuine Brussels parties and make each regional minister accountable to the entire population, while preserving a guaranteed representation for the Dutch-speaking minority.

It will also be necessary to entrust our City-Region with the exercise, within the borders of its territory, of the powers currently held by the Communities, especially compulsory education. This must enable Brussels to take on the task of providing its pupils with the skills they need, in particular the linguistic skills which the local context makes both necessary and possible to equip them with.

These institutional reforms are essential to rid us of the burden and hindrance of obsolete structures. They will help us tirelessly transform our diverse and fluid population into a people capable of mobilizing itself in order to promote tolerance, mutual understanding and respect; in order to tackle the socio-economic divides that are tearing our city apart; in order to reclaim our public spaces, to make the softer modes of transport safer, to reduce noise pollution and to make the air of our streets more breathable; in order to play a leading role in global action against climate change; in order to make the many diasporas present in Brussels valuable instruments for the sustainable development of both their countries of origin and their host city; in order to make Brussels a city where all children can walk without fear, where all young people can hope to find suitable training, a meaningful job and a home they can live in with dignity; and in order to establish a multifaceted and mutually beneficial collaboration with the Flemish and Walloon components of the Brussels metropolitan area.

In the run-up to the 2007 federal elections, ten thousand Brussels residents signed a call entitled “*Nous existons/ Wij bestaan/We exist*”. In the aftermath, the *États généraux de Bruxelles* brought together hundreds of researchers and stakeholders in an unprecedented effort to take stock of the situation and outline an exciting project for our city.

A decade later, the Brussels identity has been considerably strengthened. This identity is nothing like a national identity and will necessarily be different from the identities Flanders and Wallonia may hope to develop. It will be the identity of a cosmopolitan city, marked by a diversity that is simultaneously an inexhaustible wealth and an ever-renewed challenge, capable of forward-looking patriotism that could not be more remote from backward-looking nationalism, united by the attachment to a territory, to symbolic places such as the Place de la Bourse, this Place du Peuple de Bruxelles where Brusselsers of all colours and from all walks of life can gather in order to mourn as well as to exult.

With all the citizens, all the associations, all the political groups that share our attachment to our city, our enthusiasm for what it can become, our impatience with what prevents it, let us dare to free Brussels from the institutions that are bridling it and let us build, day after day, a little better the People our city needs if it is to be able to shape its destiny.

*For Aula Magna: Eric Corijn, Alain Deneef, Myriam Gérard, Henri Goldman, Michel Hubert, Alain Maskens, Yvan Vandenbergh, Philippe Van Parijs, Fatima Zibouh.*