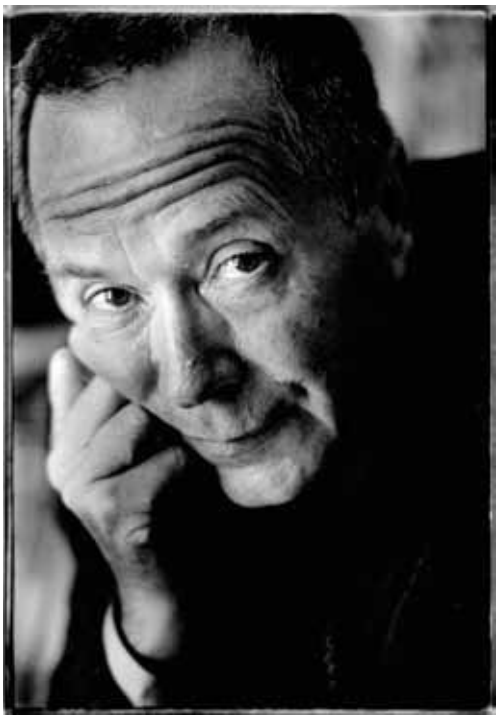
Luc Huyse: from Academic to Public Intellectual

It is not often the case that academic sociologists are showered with all manner of awards and literary accolades, yet in recent years the Leuven sociologist Luc Huyse (° 1937) has received a string of distinctions. In May 2009 he received the 59th Ark Prize, a prestigious prize awarded by the *Vrije Woord* to those who defend freedom of expression in all its facets. In 2007 he received the ABN-Amro non-fiction prize for his work on how societies deal with a traumatic past. Luc Huyse is thus one of the most visible and influential intellectuals in Flemish society. Above all, he continues to fulfil that role with verve, despite the fact that he officially retired ten years ago – something that has not prevented him from becoming even more active. In 1989 as well as in 2008, respondents to a survey named Huyse as one of the most important intellectuals in Flanders, a position that is due to a highly individual combination of intellectual and social activity. The jury for the Ark Prize rightly described him as a seismograph for Flemish society: whenever there are political or social developments in Flanders, Huyse is the first to register and explain them.

The path of Luc Huyse's intellectual career is exemplary. As early as the end of the 1960s, he was one of the first to apply the theory of 'consociational democracy' (developed in the Netherlands by Arend Lijphart) to Belgium. In divided societies, there are few political options apart from searching for a compromise, ensuring that all groups continue to feel involved in political decision-making. The disadvantage of such a consensus democracy, however, is that it is mainly the political elite who are experienced in working out a compromise each time. Within such a system, the vast majority of the population often remain detached and passive, because there is a fear that popular mobilisation can lead only to serious and unmanageable conflicts. In his thesis (1970), Huyse already expressed deep concern regarding this lack of political participation, long before it became an area of focus in political science. Shortly after completing his thesis, Huyse was appointed Professor of Sociology at the Catholic University of Leuven, a 'lectern' of which he made use for three decades to make his voice heard in the public debate.



Luc Huyse (1937-).
Photo by Filip Claus.

Huyse's work also appealed to a wider public. In a number of more popular works, he explained why Belgian politics can be regarded as an 'armed peace'. Belgium is characterised by three fundamental cleavages: that between the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking communities, another between believers and non-believers, and the antithesis of labour and capital. These conflicts shape the political landscape and, obviously, they will never entirely disappear. They can be pacified, however, for example by working out a major compromise. This is typified by the School Pact of 1958, which harmonised the system in terms of funding for Catholic schools and official schools, thus resolving the ideological tensions in the long term.

Huyse's work also focused on other social and political conflicts, such as the punishment (after the Second World War) of those who collaborated with the German occupying forces. He would later apply this expertise in other countries such as South Africa and Ethiopia: what is the best way for new democracies to deal with persons who share responsibility for the crimes of a former dictatorship?

There is no doubt that Huyse played an important role in the social modernisation of Flanders in the period 1960-1980. He was one of the most prominent critics of old and rigid structures that often still functioned according to an outdated social structure based on ideology and religion. He advocated a more modern relationship between citizens and the political system. The system should provide greater opportunity for political participation and allow greater scope for assertive, emancipated citizens. Today this might seem self-evident, but thirty years ago this was not the case at all. One could even argue that these concepts have become self-evident precisely because of the work of Huyse and others of his generation. Huyse's analyses were so influential because he was always able to strike a perfect balance between academic rigour and social engagement. Academics, too, are increasingly swept along by the fast pace of the mass media, and are sometimes tempted to let themselves be carried away by the whim of the moment and produce 'bite-sized chunks' for television. Huyse never did this: his interventions in the public debate were always based on a consistent theoretical framework. In his works he rarely used the names of prominent authors such as Arend Lijphart or Ulrich Beck, but the well-read could immediately recognise the broad sociological theory within which his work could be understood.

At the same time, Huyse was not above reflecting on everyday subjects from this theoretical perspective. The scandal of the Dutroux affair in 1996, a televised election debate, or the referendum on a new bridge in Antwerp in 2009: Huyse consistently commented on each of these subjects. It is somewhat ironic that, although Huyse has fulfilled the role of socially engaged intellectual for thirty years, his successors apparently do not feel called to follow his example. The mass media – and television in particular – apparently no longer have a need for well-thought-out social analyses. Or, to put it more optimistically: Belgian society is now well and truly emancipated and 'depillarised', and this is a battle that no longer needs to be fought. Seen from this perspective, the life's work of Luc Huyse has been particularly successful.

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Translated by Yvette Mead