

Dear participants,

1.

During Caroline Pauwels' rectorship, I worked closely with her as her academic policy adviser. Every day we discussed the issues that arose; together we wrote the texts through which Caroline developed her ideas. Based on that, I think I have gained some insight into how Caroline saw the role of universities and scientists in society.

Caroline often used two terms in this context: engagement and activism. It is important to keep these terms apart, because in Caroline's thinking they indicate two different attitudes and positions that scientists and universities can adopt.

Partly because of her reading of Hannah Arendt, engagement was very important to Caroline. Engagement is about your relationship to yourself, to others, to society, to the world. Engagement is about being aware of those relationships. In concrete terms, for the scientist this means: being aware of what you are doing, of the choices you make, of what you study (and what not), of how you do it, of the funds you use to do so, of the use that can be made of your results, of the impact and implications of what you do.

Being aware of these relationships is of course not something that applies exclusively to scientists. In Caroline's vision of life, we should all be aware of those relationships in everything we do: what do I do, what do I not do, what can I do, what can or should I not do, what is the impact of what I do or don't do to the other... For Caroline, engagement was an integral part of her "amor mundi".

But precisely because science and scientists are in a position where what they study or don't study, what happens or doesn't happen with their research, can have such a big impact on others, on society, on the world,

Caroline considered it very important that scientists constantly ask themselves these questions about their position, role and function in society.

Scientists have power and influence and should therefore be aware of this. Scientists can make choices and should therefore be aware of this. That is why Caroline was a supporter and advocate of engaged science, of scientists who are aware of what they are doing.

Activism, from Caroline's point of view, was different from engagement. Activism means that you want to achieve certain social goals or bring about certain societal changes. You can of course be an activist; there are situations where you feel yourself obliged to become an activist: but then as a citizen. As a scientist, that is much more difficult.

As a scientist, it is your job to do good research and to communicate about it, through publications, through your teaching, possibly through interventions in the public debate. Whenever you intervene as a scientist in the public debate, you need to know when you speak as a scientist on the basis of your expertise, and when you step outside your expertise and therefore no longer intervene as a scientist.

For clarity's sake: scientists, as members of society, have every right to be activists. But they must realize for themselves where their scientific expertise ends and where they rather use their status as scientists to lend a certain authority to their arguments and positions.

As a scientist you know the state of knowledge and expertise within a domain and you are very careful to make statements that fall outside that domain. If, as a scientist, you want to actively contribute to one or other social action, you remain a scientist as long as it concerns things that fall within your domain. If you go beyond that, you are no longer a scientist, but an activist. Nothing wrong with that, but it is a different role and position, and one should be aware of this.

2.

How did Caroline try to make that distinction in practice? The issue of the hunger-striking asylum seekers staying on our campus is an interesting case in that respect, which I will come back to shortly. First I want to say something about the positioning of the VUB as an engaged university or, more precisely, as an “urban engaged university”.

The engagement that Caroline expects from scientists and universities will always be contextual: it is determined by the tradition and the context in which specific scientists and universities are situated.

The Vrije Universiteit Brussel stands in a certain tradition: that of the Enlightenment and of humanism. It is located in a metropolitan environment, with all the opportunities and challenges that entails. It is based in Brussels: in a city divided in many different ways. It is a Dutch-speaking university in a multilingual environment. All these elements are important when you ask yourself who you are as a university and what the relationship is with your environment and what your position, role and function in society is.

Spurred on by Caroline, the VUB positions itself as an “urban engaged university”: a university in a metropolitan context, which wants to make that city the subject of its research and education and which, in line with its humanist tradition, also wants to contribute to the city and society, through research and education.

This context and this engagement form the background against which we as a university were confronted with the presence, at the beginning of 2021, of asylum seekers occupying buildings on our campus and on the ULB campus. Caroline's position, which would form the basis of our position as a university, was twofold.

One, as humanists we have a responsibility to people who are clearly in an emergency situation. Therefore we will receive the occupiers as best we can. We will offer them basic comfort, so that they can stay here in humane conditions. Two, as a scientific institution, we will mobilize our expertise, based on research and education. On the basis of our expertise, we want to provide more insight into the problem and we also offer our expertise to policymakers and to society, in the hope of finding a solution for this problem.

That positioning was controversial. Part of the university community - students and staff - thought that the university should be more activist: condemning government policies, taking positions for regularization, for the right to free migration, for open borders. Caroline often spoken with and listened to those activists and asylum seekers. For some, it remained difficult to understand how, as a university, you want to be engaged on the one hand, but not condemn government policy on the other. Our engagement, Caroline emphasized again and again, is twofold: on the one hand, as humanists, to help people in need; on the other hand, as a university, to provide expertise based on scientific research, in order to better understand and possibly help solve this problem.

For Caroline, this was probably the most difficult case during her rectorship. What not everyone knows is how, behind the scenes, she constantly intervened with all possible ministers and agencies to convince them of the urgency of the problem. How she contacted and mobilized experts, inside and outside the university, to help find ways out of the impasse. Caroline's commitment to this issue was very strong, but it remained consistent with the dual policy she had set out for the university.

3.

During her rectorate, Caroline was of course confronted with other cases that tested her views on the position, role and function of the university and of science in society. In fact, every day was a test: as a rector, every day you have to make decisions which inevitably raise questions concerning the position, role and function of the university.

Almost every day you are asked to support some initiative, to condemn an abuse or to declare your solidarity with some action. As rector, you are also constantly in the spotlight: what you do and say, or don't do and say, is closely followed by the university community, on social media, by the press. In order to survive, I think, like Caroline, you have to be able to fall back on a solid set of values and a clear view of the position, role and function of the university.

Caroline sometimes had the reputation of being "a slow decision maker". That is probably right, in the sense that before making a decision she always informed herself extensively and always wanted to see the issues involved from different angles. Caroline, however, had some very clear principles for herself from which she would never deviate and for which she would have suffered the consequences if necessary, even if it would have meant stepping down as rector.

Her attitude in the case of the Confucius Institute was an example of this. Under a previous rectorship, when geopolitical relations were different and expectations for China were high, the VUB had entered into strong partnerships with a number of specific Chinese universities and had also teamed up with the Confucius Institute, a body that depends directly on the Chinese government and whose mission it is to build goodwill for China through language lessons and other activities.

It quickly became clear that some of those partnerships, and certainly the collaboration with the Confucius Institute, were problematic for several

reasons. Although it was always Caroline's intention not renew the current collaborations, things were accelerated by press reports about scientific and other espionage activities by Chinese students and researchers.

Intense discussions took place within our university: after all, quite a few departments had developed close collaborations with China over the years, which they wished to continue, quite a few colleagues had good contacts with Chinese researchers and some departments certainly benefitted from Chinese funding and scholarships. Caroline talked to everyone, tried to understand all points of view, but did not waver from her position: in the current circumstances, cooperation with the Confucius Institute and specific Chinese universities was no longer possible and we also had to monitor scientific cooperation with China much more strictly.

For her, that was also a consequence of the engagement she expected from scientists and from universities. Because universities and scientists are in a position where what they teach and study can have such a big impact on others, on society, on the world, Caroline considered it crucial that as scientists, we constantly ask ourselves these questions about our position, role and function in society. Even if that means, as in the case of cooperation with specific Chinese universities and institutions, that you have to miss out on interesting funds and scholarships.

Caroline intended to develop and put down on paper her ideas about the role, position and function of science and scientists. Unfortunately, she was not able to do that. But I think that the example she set for us during her rectorate and during her lifetime can provide us with lasting inspiration.

Thank you.