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From Scientific Patronage to Philanthrocapitalism (and back)

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Maastricht University

Inaugural speech

dr. Kenneth Bertrams

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

From Scientific Patronage to Philanthrocapitalism (and Back)

Contact: kenneth.bertrams@ulb.be

Dear Dean Neuhold, Waarde Collega's, Dear Colleagues and Friends,

If, like the former Dean of FASOS, Sophie Vanhoonacker, you ever happen to spend some time in Florence, Tuscany, you'd probably end up walking along this impressive yet austere palazzo – the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi (**SLIDE 1/A**). The building, divided in three floors of decreasing heights, strikes by its assorted façade made of three successive layers of masonry, from the rusticated masonry of the ground floor coupled with the so-called "kneeling windows" to the smooth and delicate stonework of the top floor. Art historians concur to say that, at the time of its building in the heart of the *quattrocento*, the palazzo designed by architect **Michelozzo di Bartolomeo** at the request of Cosimo di Medici, was quite distinctive from the style *en vogue* in 15th-century Florence. And in fact, the outside of the Palazzo strikes by its simple and modest-looking character, which contrasts – as we shall see – by the richness and elegance of the decoration inside the building. There is more to see than meets the eye, at least from a first glance. Entering the first floor of the palazzo (the so-called *piano nobile*), the visitor's eyes are caught by a vast symmetrical chapel which hosts a major altar with artworks of Filippo Lippi (**SLIDE 1/B**).

The altar is surrounded on both sides by the wall paintings of Benozzo Gozzoli with a two-part fresco entitled *The Procession of the Magi*. On the eastern side of the wall, the fresco depicts a collective portrait of the members of the Medici family riding in the foreground (**SLIDE 2/A**). The youngest magus Caspar, supposedly representing **Lorenzo de' Medici il Magnifico,** leads the procession on a white horse. He is followed from a distance by his father Piero, the commissioner of the artwork, and the family founder, Cosimo. If we zoom in a little more **(SLIDE 2/B)**, we realize that, contrary to his son and his grandson, Cosimo sits on a humble donkey, conveying once again the impression of modesty. And if we zoom in a little further, we can see that the artist – Benozzo Gozzoli – has made his own little "selfie" as he appears among the crowd staring at the observer **(SLIDE 2/C).** This leads me to a metaphoric observation: though they hardly have anything in common, the patron (here Piero de' Medici) and his client (Gozzoli) belong to the same worldview, just like they are displayed here in the same picture. That is precisely what patronage does: it brings out a web of relationships in a given context that construct the figure of the patron and that of the client. These two figures owe their "existence" to the relationships they have with one another. Yet they hardly exist all alone, rather they do coexist in a wider framework, environment, and community.

Starting this presentation with the Medici family may sound quite obvious for those of you familiar with the major contribution this dynasty had in the promotion of arts, culture, and science. More than a century after this painting, it was Cosimo II (then Grand Duke of Tuscany) who named Galileo as court mathematician. A well-covered story, I was happy to discover that, in his own inaugural lecture, Cyrus Mody also referred to Mario Biagioli's instant classic, *Galileo, Courtier* (**SLIDE 3/A**).[1] In Biagioli's account, Galileo owed his skyrocketing scientific career as much to his exceptional mathematical skills as to his shrewd ability to steer his way in the Florentine court system. Galileo's story opens up the black box of the social and cultural mechanisms of court-based patronage **(SLIDE 3/B)**:

« Given the nexus between social status and credibility, high social status was the password to cognitive legitimation, patronage was the institution through which social status and credibility could be gained, and the court was the space in which the most powerful patronage relationships could be established »

[1] Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier. The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

In this sense, court patronage encapsulated a rich and complex dynamic of social relationships; or one could even say a "market" of symbolic goods where knowledge, ideas, and even opinions could be "traded" for recognition, prestige, and social status. However, this exchange of symbolic goods, which is reminiscent of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, had to follow specific patterns and codes – what Biagioli calls the etiquette of the court system. Etiquette was a centerpiece in the court machinery as it was in the whole age of absolutism. Then, there is a second key concept we owe to modern historians, a concept that is useful for both early modern science as well as for later periods – and this is the figure of the courtier or the broker. Modern historians of science have fruitfully taken up this idea of a "brokered world" **(SLIDE 4)** setting the stage for a global perspective of interactions and connections, and leading to a less Western-centric vision of our history. Quite clearly, in the smaller world of scientific patronage, go-betweens and intermediaries are plentiful, and their role is inversely proportional to their visibility. It is an "underworld" rich of diverse status, gender and social conditions whose historical exploration is still underway.

Now, if you'd allow me to make a giant leap forward in time, I'd like to evoke this strange beast of Philanthrocapitalism, which appears in the title. Doing so will enable you to better grasp my intention, or so I hope. Philanthrocapitalism is a term coined by journalist Matthew Bishop in a 2006 report for the weekly journal *The Economist*. A couple of years later, Bishop and his colleague at *The Economist* Michael Green expanded their view in a book bearing a rather explicit subtitle: *Philanthrocapitalism: How Giving Can Save the World*, then further published with an even more catchy subtitle: *How the Rich Can Save the World* (**SLIDE 5/A**). In their own definition, Bishop and Green explain that (**SLIDE 5/B**) "At its broadest, the term refers to the growing role for private sector actors in addressing the biggest social and environmental challenges facing the planet." A less neutral and perhaps more accurate meaning of the term, however, concerns the potentialities of an application of business technique and strategy to charity. Philanthrocapitalism, in this sense, may perhaps save the world, but aims beforehand at guiding philanthropic action toward more "effective" ends – read: profitable ends – by applying the logic of the market from the corporate sector to the charity sector. Now, the intellectual premises of these "market consciousness", "impact-oriented" and "effective giving" characteristics of philanthropy 2.0 draw on an academic contribution by the economists and Harvard Business School professors, Michael Porter (also famous for his 5 Forces framework) and Mark Kramer entitled "Philanthropy's New Agenda: Creating Value". The piece was published in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1999. With its focus on measurement, monitoring, and targeted investment, the article became a landmark reference for a new generation of philanthropic entrepreneurs who have presumably never read it yet was happy enough to know that a scholarly contribution gave its academic blessing in reconciling venture capital with virtuous capitalism. To be fair, Porter and Kramer's article followed the path traced by another group of scholars but I'll leave this seemingly genetic investigation to others.[2]

To what extent is philanthrocapitalism a new phenomenon, or is it the result of a new movement of socially-inclined capitalism? It is interesting here to follow Bishop and Green's double historical agenda: on the one hand, they have to sell the concept as new and unique; on the other, they need to legitimate the product and buttress their argument in the history of philanthropy and in history in general. In order to do so, they delineate four "Golden Ages" of philanthropy – the Renaissance, the emergence of joint-stock capitalism in the 18th century, the

[2] Christine W. Letts, William Ryan, and Allen Grossman, "Virtuous Capital: What Foundations Can Learn from Venture Capitalists," *Harvard Business Review*, March/April 1997.

Victorian era, and the age of Andrew Carnegie in America. After which, they add (**SLIDE 5/C**) "we see the same pattern as today: innovations in capitalism being used by a new class of entrepreneurs to take on social problems."[3] Philanthrocapitalism is thus both new and old, depending on the mood of the buyer. Still, historical manipulation at this level is highly problematic. To most of you, I am sure (or I hope), the presentation of these four "golden ages", which have no linkage with one another, amounts to cherry-picking the evidence for the sake of a hypothesis, which ought to be demonstrated instead. Shopping by analogy, i.e. pre-selecting what suits us in the past in order to give a current phenomenon consistency is called **presentism** – it has nothing to do with history. But that's precisely because it's so contrary to the historian's craftsmanship that it lacks a proper historical answer. When a scholar or a scientist is deprived of the capacity to test an hypothesis, he or she feels baffled, bemused, mystified. This reminds me of one of my favorite quotes in the field of epistemology (and to reassure you, I am not hunting for quotes in epistemology), a quote **(SLIDE 6)** we owe to the Austrian physicist Wolfgang Pauli: "*Das ist nicht nur nicht rightig; es ist nicht einmal falsch*!" (that's not only not right; it's not even wrong").

Rather, therefore, than debunking this assertion, which would ultimately give too much credit to a nonscientific claim, I would like to spend the rest of this lecture to focus on some of the underpinnings of this promotional rhetoric that weaves a magic link between Bill Gates and Cosimo de Medici. It is quite true that it is the historian's business to condemn the instrumentalization of history but these distortions are so abundant and stemming from every direction (media, business, politics, even from the academia), that it amounts to a full-time job. At the same time, hopefully, grappling with these ideas will bring about the

[3] Matthew Bishop and Michael Green, « Philanthrocapitalism rising », *Society* (2015) 52:541–548 (here p. 543).

research program I would like to carry out in the next years at the intersection of the history of science and technology and business history.

Part of the problem, I would argue, lies in our current presentist interpretation of philanthropy and its conflation with scientific patronage; or more aptly said, in the abusive generalization of the aims and mechanisms of the so-called modern private US philanthropic foundation to other philanthropic experiences and to scientific patronage in particular. To assert my point, let me start with a snapshot overview of the current body of academic knowledge on modern US philanthropy (**SLIDE 7**). That scholarship is immensely rich, most of the time of high academic standards, and sometimes very inspiring. I have left on this desk a sample of references among those that have been the most inspiring – I am particularly indebted to the studies of Volker Berghahn, who was my academic supervisor at University of Columbia, NY during my postdoctoral stay in 2004, and of Ludovic Tournès, from the University of Geneva, with their challenging accounts on the transnational take of US foundations in Europe and beyond. Thanks to service of the Rockefeller Archives Foundation, scholars have privileged access to the historical collections of some of the biggest and oldest US philanthropic foundations: the Rockefeller Foundation, the Russel Sage Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. Unsurprisingly, the availability of this rich material has had a huge impact on the scholarly output. Each year, a countless number of blogs, articles, and books are highlighting one of the manifold actions of these organizations. Of course, the richness of information has generated a framing bias, given that our perception of historical realities is highly dependent upon the availability of sources.

Whether their prime focus is on medicine, hygiene, natural science, social science, foreign policy, public management or business administration, the studies crafted with ample evidence provided by the RAC show how scientific disciplines, US universities and beyond, as well as other institutions worldwide (including hospitals, have been transformed by tailored-made programs that professional teams of advisers have conceived over time. The scrutiny here is less on the wealthy entrepreneurs at the origins of these trusts and foundations, than on the web of highly-educated trustees, board directors, and most of all program managers, who, by acting behind the scenes, in the foundations' kitchen, so to speak, co-shaped many of the decisions. It is important to understand that these intermediary managers, perhaps the equivalent of the go-between and brokers mentioned earlier, were used to fieldwork investigation. Their method of reporting, the surveys and questionnaires they used, are now irreplaceable sources for historians. But they also convey, an analytical mindset that some observers have coined as "technocratic". Nowadays, the term has a rather pejorative meaning and is used to point out all highly-qualified personnel, civil servants, employees of important organizations, most of them public governmental organizations, like the European Union. I have been working on the ideological determinants of technocracy with other professional groups, mostly the community of engineers. It would be interesting to track down more precisely the circulation and flows of this technocratic rationality and its power of legitimation and stabilization across various groups. No matter what, these alleged technocrats were not only men. In fact, the early presence of women at the top positions of philanthropic organizations has been regularly brought to attention **(SLIDE 8)**. A nurse by training and a prolific coordinator of relief effort, **Louisa Lee Schuyler** was appointed by Olivia Sage, the energetic widow of Russell Sage, as one of the original trustees of the Foundation bearing her late husband's name. A former school teacher from upstate New York, **Katharine Bement Davis** was one of the first women to earn a PhD in the United States, in the field of economics from the University of Chicago (so generously endowed by John D. Rockefeller). Before being appointed Corrections Commissioner of the city of New York (here also the first woman to head a major agency in the city), she supervised the Rockefeller Foundations's Bureau of Social Hygiene. Mary Ellen Richmond was undoubtedly the pioneer of social work. Her groundbreaking investigation conducted at the Russell Sage Foundation, and published under the title *Social Diagnosis* in 1917, is still considered as the spelling book of social work thanks to its methodology of case-study. Finally, perhaps the most famous person in this portrait gallery, Mary Van Kleeck, a left-wing economist, advocate of scientific management, a one-time supporter then a harsh critic of the New Deal, led the Russell Sage Foundation's Department of Industrial Relations for no less than 30 years.

To what extent could we say that these foundations were scientific and socially engaged at the same time? In spite of their differences, most studies endorse the widely held view that the modern private US philanthropic foundation coincided with, and even ushered in, the secular break with traditional charity. In the second decade of the 20th century, a handful of industrial tycoons and financiers turned philanthropists strategically opposed to the narrow bestowal of their giving pledge. As an alternative, they decided to opt for a broad scope of missions with a universal claim **(SLIDE 9)**. The goal of the Rockefeller Foundation as drafted in the Foundation's charter in 1913 by Reverend Frederick T. Gates is illustrative of this scale adjustment. On a social level, the large US philanthropic foundation reflected the changing concern in the upper ranks of the progressive elite, which prompted a shift of focus from the social symptoms of industrial capitalism to their deep-rooted causes. Society's problems, in other words, could not only be improved, they could be prevented instead. For some, this point is where paths have diverged between Europe and the United States in their respective treatments of welfare and social justice. In his seminal book, *Atlantic Crossings*, Daniel Rodgers has cast doubt on that simplistic explanation. But even on the American soil, Judith Sealander has shown how pervasive the logic of distributive charity continued to be during the first two decades of the large US philanthropic foundations, at least until the Great Depression of the early 1930s. On the 150 foundations which existed at that time, she identified that "only eight creators of foundations established institutions that fully embodied scientific philanthropy and embraced general goals for shaping society".[4] Which leads Judith Sealander to conclude that "Scientific philanthropy was foundation philanthropy, but not all foundation philanthropy was scientific." In the same vein, Robert Kohler points out that we should be wary of the term "scientific" in "scientific philanthropy". The word "scientific" meant the application of system and business methods, rather than the science of universities and research institutes. The diffusion of existing knowledge, not the creation of new knowledge, was the first objective of this first generation of so-called "scientific" philanthropists.[5] Despite the wide spectrum of their mission statement, the range of philanthropic initiatives introduced by Andrew Carnegie especially after 1900 can hardly be boiled down to a single umbrella foundation (a closer look at the chart of programs envisioned and established by Andrew Carnegie, listed here by the amount of the endowment, also shows that the road toward the final station – The Carnegie Corporation of New York – was nothing but linear. Carnegie institutions were practicing a form of learning by doing where circumstances were more significant than any pre-emptive strategy **(SLIDE 10)**).

To sum up, the landscape of private US philanthropic foundations in the first quarter of the 20th century is more varied than the presentist claim would suggest. But there's more to this. If the concept of the large general-purpose foundation is ill-fitted to describe the whole range of philanthropic initiatives in the United States, its use is even more problematic to understand what I would call the European experience of scientific philanthropy, for lack of a better term.

[4] J. Sealander in Friedman and McGarve (2002), p. 223.
[5] Kohler (1991), p. 41.

It is as though, in a strange twist of mimesis, historians were about to reproduce the universal claim of philanthropists, a claim that they would otherwise criticize. On the other hand, there were also some reasons to locate in old Europe the intellectual and organizational roots of the large private US philanthropic; there was a feeling of déjà vu, a sense of "been there, done that".

Therefore, when Olivier Zunz wrote **(SLIDE 11)** that "the general-purpose foundation was a genuine American invention",[6] my first reaction was to disagree with such statement. There had to be other examples! Other examples of philanthropic foundations broadly conceived outside the US. Evidently, the Nobel Foundation, established in 1900, comes to mind. But its prize-awarding system makes it more a follower of the old Academies than a forerunner of philanthropic foundations. The Carl-Zeiss Stiftung **(SLIDE 12)** founded in 1889 by the German physicist and optical entrepreneur Ernst Karl Abbe comes closer to the criteria. However, the purposes of the *Stiftung* explicitly entwined the company's legal structure of ownership and control (as a block of nontransferable shares) with more scientific goals. Still in Germany (I should say in Prussia), the famous Physikalisch-Technisch Reichsanstalt erected in 1887 with the money of industrialist Werner von Siemens and under the impulse of Hermann von Helmholtz can be seen as setting the stage to other forms of "orchestrated philanthropy" (a term coined by Jeffrey Allan Johnson). Such Prussian partnership, for which the Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft stands as the archetype, which would emerge in the late 19th century / early 20th century. The Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft is better known today under the respectable name of the Max-Planck Society, which includes a network of cutting-edge research institutes and is certainly ranked among the most performant research organization worldwide. Interestingly, the intellectual architecture of the KWG involved various stakeholders: industrialists (the Siemens, Krupps, Rathenau),

[6] Zunz (2012), p. 22.

scientists, but also State officials from the highest ranks (Kaiser Wilhelm Second, Chancellor Bismarck), but also scholars converted into the art of scientific diplomacy and institution-building like the former church historian Friedrich Althoff.

Nevertheless, the earliest experiment of European foundation which nears the profile set forth by the US foundation comes from a small country producing beer. Any guess? (…) Well, it's the Carlsberg Foundation, set up in 1876, by the Danish brewer Jacob Christian Jacobsen **(SLIDE 13)**. The Carlsberg Foundation, explicitly established for "the advancement of scientific purposes", was instrumental in supporting Danish scholars and scientists with a groundbreaking grant-giving system according to which applications had to undergone an evaluation process by review panels. This was a major stepping stone toward independent evaluation. Then again, a national bias was exerted, as all funds were reserved for Danish researchers, scholars and scientists alike (for instance Niels Bohr who was one of its regular and most significant beneficiaries. However, as I have tried to show in a paper I am completing about the Solvay research institutes – and which I have endlessly been completing the last years ☺ – patriotic patronage and internationalism are not mutually exclusive. They are compatible as long as the terms of the negotiations serve the interests of all parties.

Interest: I finally uttered that word, which was hovering since the beginning of my talk. Gift-giving, as Marcel Mauss and others have shown, is not sealed to other forms of symbolic payback, quite the contrary **(SLIDE 14)**. Many scholars (Warren Hastrom, Bruno Latour, Steven Woolgar) have discussed the process of scientific recognition, prestige, and other tangible and intangible reward. What was seen as outside the framework of scientific production is now fully admitted as being part of the system.

However, are these models adjusted to history? Why, in other words, would late nineteenth-century / early twentieth-century scientists accept the financial support of patrons and become "beneficiaries" of their "benefactors"? On a more mundane level, perhaps, but backed by evidence, we could simply answer: to do research. That is at least what scientists like the German physicist Herman von Helmholtz answered when he had to justify why he'd take the head of the PTR **(SLIDE 15/A)**. In a letter to Lord Kelvin in September 1883, Helmholtz wrote: ***"I have been urged to accept the direction of it (…) It is an important thing for science, and also for my own personal interest, because I may hope, that I shall be able to concentrate my power of working, as much as has been left to me, into one purely scientific direction"***.[7] In another letter 18 months later send to his British colleague, Lord Rayleigh, he was even clearer, ***"I must say that I've now also had more than enough of holding lectures. We are now possibly getting, in the form of a gift from Dr. Werner Siemens, a scientific, physical observatory, one without teaching purposes and whose direction has been offered to me. This matter is only developing only too slowly, in that I am 63 years old.***"[8] Though he was only 56 years old, the same reason applied to another physicist the Dutch Hendrik Lorentz **(SLIDE 15/B).** In 1909 Lorentz decided to move to Haarlem in order to become curator of the "Natuurkundig Laboratorium" of the Teylers Stichting, yes another foundation and one of the oldest of its kind. Before that move, as full professor at Leiden University, Lorentz had a teaching assignment of no less than 14 hours a week, according to the calculation of his biographers. This did not prevent Lorentz from taking up the hardworking load of the Solvay Conferences in Physics. His organizational ability and his knack for scientific diplomacy were praised by Ernest Solvay. The Belgian philanthropist could not find Lorentz' alter ego for chemistry. After an unsuccessful attempt to convince the British chemist William Ramsay

[7] Cahan (2018), p. 618.
[8] *Ibidem.*

to write the by-laws of an Institute for Chemistry, one of Solvay's close advisers bluntly told the industrialist: "Ramsay will never be your Lorentz".

Other cases of early European science-oriented philanthropy, I am confident, would come to the fore after careful empirical investigation and cross-referencing with the current literature. This task comes down to my research agenda. Why such a program? Because I am convinced that the social and organizational mechanisms of these early research institutes, *Stiftungen*, or *stichtingen* have paved the way to a process of national institutionalization of science and science-funding. This process would come to fruition in the Western world only during and after the First World War, but was rooted in the individual grant-giving systems. These funding mechanisms are still going on today and are now mostly invisible because embedded in the daily routines and technicalities of scientific practice.

Such a research agenda will require careful empirical investigation. Once again, the current templates of scientific philanthropy, designed to cover other realities, are not effective to unveil the roots of modern European scientific patronage. Because of the constant tensions between private and public sectors in Europe, the changing economic role of the state, the distinct organizational patterns of business companies, the legacy of family capitalism, and the diversity of cultural and religious histories, just to name a few characteristics, US foundations cannot serve as a blueprint for the European experience of scientific philanthropy. Finally, I had to admit that Olivier Zunz was right: the general-purpose foundation was indeed a "genuine American invention". But it would certainly remain an invention for nobody's use if we failed to historicize the label and take it at face value.

To conclude, on our way, we have touched upon the social fabric of giving and giving back, explored a metanarrative, encountered potential alter-narratives, and suggested avenues for future research. This does not mean, however, that the final destination of this journey will be neither successful nor useful. And the risk is high that my supposed "solutions" will be even more problematic. That is precisely what the artist and photographer David Helbich has called a "Belgian solution" (**SLIDE 16**): a solution which does not provide an answer to a problem.

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This little homage to my home country brings me to the most pleasant part of this lecture.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Christine, the current Dean of FASOS, but also to former Dean, Sophie Vanhoonacker, Karin Bijsterveld, and Kiran Patel for allowing to being holder of this SHT-Chair. In a kind of mise en abime with the topic of this talk, the Chair is sponsored by a stichting, the Stichting Historie der Techniek. Thank you Erik and Jan for your patience and understanding. This inaugural lecture should have taken place years ago but I am happy that you held on today in spite of the circumstances.

Being able to be affiliated with Maastricht is a wonderful opportunity. Of course, I knew several colleagues before. Primus inter pares, my deepest gratitude goes to Ernst for when I see him many good memories flow from our Solvay Project with Nicolas and Ginette. Thank you Ernst for being always supportive. Also coming a long way, I'd like to thank Geert, Vincent, and of course Raf and Cyrus for their intellectually stimulating and always friendly presence. Cyrus has welcomed me in one of his project where I had the chance to meet other fantastic colleagues: Simone, Jelena, Candida, Michiel, Odin, Jacob, and many more. This great environment has made Maastricht my second professional home. I never leave a meeting, a discussion here without learning more and willing to know more.

However, I do not want to forget my first academic base: the Université libre de Bruxelles, with blurred boundaries between colleagues and friends. Thanks of course for those of you who could come. This means a lot to me. I realize the chance to spend time with you. But I would also like to extend my warmest thanks to my dear friend and colleague Pieter and to Sophie, but also to Nicolas, and to Serge (once my PhD supervisor and now my supportive colleague), Ilan, Didier, and many others. A special thank you goes to Ginette, my mentor, who has been a source of inspiration and trust even in the difficult times.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. In loving memory of my parents, of course, but also to my Eastchester-based family Alan and Maria, Chris & Carrie so far away but so close in my heart, my sister Cynthia and her kids Dorian, Emily, and Clara. My family extends to my "historic" friends Gilles, Ivan, Dean, and Manu (with special kisses to Naelle and Lilia).

To my dearest supporters, Flavia, Mathias, Gabriel, and Claire, no ho le parole. Grazie a Brunella che è rimasta a Bruxelles e che forse ci sta guardando con Gabriel e Claire. Li abbraccio forte. Vorrei dirvi quanto siete importanti per me e sarebbe troppo poco. Vi voglio tanto bene. Un mondo di bene come direbbe F.

Je voudrais dédier cette leçon à celles et ceux qui sont « avides de vérité et de justice » comme l'a écrit René Char. Et qui le paient au prix de souffrances.