

## THE CONCEPT OF LIBERTARIAN MUNICIPALISM

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The concept of libertarian municipalism is not well known in Belgium at all. In Flanders it hasn't been until recently that people, mostly anarchists, are beginning to understand what it is.. The coming about of this conference certainly has a lot to do with it, together with the publication of Janet Biehl's new book and the appearance of a special issue on lib. mun. of the magazine *Verz*, a left-libertarian magazine in which Roger Jacobs writes a lot. Social ecology isn't that well known either. Until recently, it has only been Roger who regularly wrote about it. About two years ago, me and some other people from Antwerp really got interested in it too. And, I must add, the fact that I really got interested in anarchism, 4 or 5 years ago, was also due to the fact- that there was an interesting philosopher like Murray Bookchin involved in the anarchist movement. To my opinion, also a lot of other people\*in Flanders feel attracted to anarchism because many anarchists are also into radical ecology. This alliance is more widespread and stronger i\_n'Flanders than in the french 'speaking part of Belgium.

Those who don't like this strong alliance don't organise themselves,', leave the movement or stay within it without taking a clear stance towards the different kinds of anarchism. Most of the anarchists make a synthesis 'of all the different traditions of anarchism o anarcho-syndicalism, lifestyle anarchism, anarcho-communism, etc. A recent call from the french speaking part of.,the country to establish and build up a.natipnal anarcho-syndicalist movement first appeared to engender some success, but the lack of an .anarcho-syndicalist tradition in Flanders and the archaic element within the theory of anar= chosyndicalism have brought about a downfall again. What seems to attract radicals 'more are radical grassroots movements like the squatters movement or groups that demand car free inner towns and public transport for'free or want a humane policy towards refugees. These groups often use'tactics of civil disobedience and sabotage.' Some of the radicals join animal rights groups, ecology action groups or the peace' movement.. The anarchist movement mainly is about making anarchist or left-libertarian magazines (in Flanders these. words are often used as. synonyms),, creating radical information centres where people can borrow or buy books and magazines, buy T-shirts or badges, etc. Anarchists organise'debates or lectures, grow

organic food or supply vegetarian food at all kinds of activities, or have joined the Anarchist Black Cross from Gent. The biggest anarchist group is the 'Feministische anarchistische meiden', an anarcho-feminist groups with mainly young women and girls in it from Gent. The organised anarchist movement is quite big in Gent. There is also a part of it living in Antwerp and Leuven. Antwerp and Gent are the two largest cities in Flanders, Leuven is a university town and most of its inhabitants are students. Also, sometimes somewhere else springs up an anarchist group, but it as easily disappears again. The anarchist movement in Flanders contains about 50 people who are active in it on a regular base.

Because of the fact that the Belgian cities aren't far apart, in a geographical sense, radicals from Flemish cities and Brussels, where most of the radicals speak french, often cooperate. For example, the average distance between these cities is only 50 kilometers. There would certainly be even more cooperation when Belgians would be fully bilingual. A lot of radicals live in Gent. It has a tradition of big leftist groups, there has also been a continuity in the existence of anarchist groups for decades now. At the Gent university a lot of marxists and other radicals have taught, which not only attracted radicals wanting to study at a university but also helped emerge radical student movements by the end of the sixties, movements that are still existing and that are large in amount. Also, Gent is known for its radical youth culture. They have about 6 squats, where they have cafés and organise parties and concerts, mostly with hardcore bands. This all appeals to a lot of radical youngsters and lifestyle anarchists from other towns or from the country side and many of them decide to go and live in Gent. They all sympathize with the squat movement, as we can see when squatters have organised a demonstration for a better policy towards unoccupied houses, speculation and slum dwellings and hundreds of people participate in it.

In Gent, there are also social movements, with a lot of reformists in it, trying to obtain people's referenda for a policy that diminishes car traffic in the city, like referenda to stop the emergence of new parking lots or to get free public transport. Unfortunately these groups consider people's referenda as ultimate forms of direct democracy. Also a lot of the inhabitants vote for the Vlaams Blok, which means Flemish Front, an extreme right party. These neo-fascists have obtained even more successes in the city of Antwerp. Since the beginning of the seventies they are expanding their popularity by

creating a more humane image of themselves. As they say in German, they have become salonfähig. By the end of the seventies they started to try moderating their militant street-fighting and openly fascist groups and stopped emphasizing the national question. Instead, they started emphasizing the proposals they had for another policy towards non-European immigrants, criminals, the unemployed and the poor. These were very popular themes and the answers the Vlaams Blok gave for all kinds of problems were very easy to understand and so they became so popular in Flanders that they obtained more than 10% of the votes, in the city of Antwerp they even got one third of the votes recently. The fact that the extreme right has got many people sympathizing with them in Gent is quite alarming for the possibilities of the radical movements in Gent to obtain successes. These are reactionary times and the fear people have for the extreme right and what it can do won't help radicals in obtaining more space or possibilities for their own plans and desires. I have the impression that this paralyzing fear and the reformism it engenders will only be tackled when people were to become conscious of the circumstances that help spring up fascism.

Probably, Antwerp is one of the most racist cities in Europe. Although, I must add, like in Gent there are many open-minded people too. So there is somewhat of a polarization. Unfortunately, counterforces seem to be very weak. The left, in general is quite attracted to authoritarian ideas. What really is disturbing is the move toward neoliberalism of the social-democratic party or the appeal of totalitarianism to the Maoist Stalinists, a faction that is not totally unsuccessful in Antwerp city. The green party is in the city government, legitimizing its reformist stance by referring 'to the fact that' there is a danger of the other parties allying with the Vlaams Blok when 'a destabilization of the coalition would be brought about. Not that the coalition couldn't do without the greens, but without them participating they would only have a small majority.. or-so they say. Those who are against the reformist-policy like the Trotskyists of the Fourth International or radical leftists are easily being accused of dogmatism or plain foolishness when they are, by effect, splintering up the more or less valuable counterforces to the Vlaams Blok. The *greens do not realize that their own reformism plays right into the hands of the extreme right*, making the city an unliveable place, with its huge amount of car traffic, lack of nature within the city, poverty, lack of cultural activities, etc. They don't emphasize the need of radical measures to diminish social

problems like bad housing, unemployment, criminality, atomisation, etc. No wonder many people have lost their faith in the left to be able to tackle these problems.

Many people, who used to vote for the social-democrats, have now turned to the Vlaams Blok. The Socialist Party did not 'only turn to neoliberalism, it also, *lost contact with its base. It used to be in control in Antwerp, as it was* very well presented in all kinds of neighbourhood committees and organisations, but now its power is very much diminishing. In the near future it will probably become as small as the other parties in the city government. Then, only the Vlaams Blok will be left as a big party in Antwerp. Their story seems to be at the opposite of the story of the social-democrats. They have enlarged their control in Antwerp by organizing themselves pretty well, they have infiltrated all kinds of organisations, their most popular party members are from Antwerp itself, which strengthens their electoral victories and since their existence. (the Vlaams Blok was founded at the beginning of the seventies) they have had nothing but electoral successes. The only thing they will probably be disappointed about is their lack of militants, their success is mainly an electoral issue.

While the Vlaams Blok became very much more successful in Antwerp, the radical movements had a real downfall. Many anarchists were recuperated by authoritarian or reformist movements or retracted into the personal sphere and stopped being activists. About 4 years ago there was about nothing left. I and some others started to build up grassroots movements, organise lectures, participate in the anarchist direct action magazine 'De nar' (the fool) and after a while *radical movements were springing up again, although now we seem to be having a* downfall again. I and some others feel that this setback can only be brought to an end when we start to spread the ideas of social ecology, we think that there is no way back anymore because the experiences we've had disillusioned *a lot of people in the kind of movements we built up. There were too many manipulations* from authoritarian people within the movement, too less coherence in the views we shared as different kinds of groups and too much self-styled anarchists within the movement that were or are lifestyle-orientated, so it was quite hard to work together with them. I can only hope that this will bring about a new elan for the city of Antwerp.

I can not say much about the other cities in Belgium, it would also lead us too far. I know some things about the situations in Leuven and Brussels, it are cities that have

a tradition of radical and anarchist groups too. Famous anarchists like Elisée Reclus and Hem Day helped in creating a well rooted group in Brussels, where social-anarchism has had a lot of success. Also because many Spanish anarchists, running away from the Franquist regime, have helped with that.

Leuven has had success in creating radical movements after the may '68 period, with its emergence of radical student movements but because it is a student town many radicals tend to leave after they have finished their studies and the catholic university doesn't seem to be very-appealing to radical youngsters. They mostly prefer the university of Gent. Also, universities in Belgium don't really seem to attract all radicals anyhow, many tend to prefer to be drop-outs and self-taught people. Brussels and Leuven do-have the advantage to be without the danger of an extreme right rapidly expanding its power. But this could,also be just a matter of time.