

Calls to Action, Reimagining the Commons

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<http://www.livingindiversity.org/2012/05/31/brussels-picnic-the-streets/>

BRUSSELS: PICNIC THE STREETS

Philippe Van Parijs

Professor Philippe Van Parijs argues that we don't need to wait until the Eurocrisis is over, if it ever is, to imagine and reinvent more sensible and humane forms of urban life than those imposed by the tyranny and the waste of private car traffic. And perhaps, one could add, it will be only through projects like this that the different schools of 'indignados' will be able to bridge the current gap between their rich capacity to organise and express protest and disafection, and the scarcity of viable initiatives to impose effective political changes, as well as to show that there can be life – a better life – outside 'the markets'.

Furious. I can't avoid getting furious when I realise how many cities manage to transfigure their public squares, to upgrade their central areas, to make it pleasant to stroll, to meet, to breathe the clean air on a bench, to linger on a terrace, whereas in comparison, despite some progress – too timid, too slow – Brussels, in this regard, remains awful.

Yet this is not a luxury, a caprice among others. A drastic rehabilitation of the public spaces of our cities is essential for us to tell our children, our grandchildren, "You will be forced to consume less than us, and yet you will have a better life than ours." Indeed, the future of our planet can only be ensured if the residents of "the North" consume far fewer resources than they do today. They will succeed only if they are able to live in denser cities.

This will inflate inevitably the cost of housing and therefore it will reduce the average size of living quarters. Lacking enough private space, a pleasant and safe public space will become increasingly important for the balance of urban life, to elude that the younger ones explode in flats too narrow and on sidewalks too narrow, to avoid also that old people die of loneliness, and that all components of ever less homogeneous urban communities can mingle peacefully instead of remaining confined in their respective ghettos.

In Brussels and elsewhere, no major progress can be achieved without

freeing large areas from traffic and parking, either permanently or at certain hours on certain days. Not only do cars kill pedestrians and cyclists, occasionally by knocking them down, but especially little by little, by injecting dirt in their lungs. In addition, they prevent them from enjoying their city, encumbering public space, disfiguring the landscape, flooding their ears with decibels. Driving around in an urban centre must cease to be the rule and become an exception only justifiable by a specific reason: the transport of heavy objects, for example, or of a disabled person.

In Brussels as elsewhere, there are dreams and projects that aim at the right direction. But it is time to go faster and harder, especially since as the capital of a Europe in disarray, Brussels must lead by example. If the authorities are too timid and slow to tackle it themselves, then we need that people themselves take things in hand, as they have dared to do in the past. On May 7, 1971, the anglophone magazine *The Bulletin* launched a petition to get rid of any traffic the Grand Place in Brussels, "the world`s most beautiful car park." Signed by many residents, including Jacques Brel, the petition failed to move the municipal authorities. The *Bulletin* organized then a sit-down protest in the form of a picnic kindly blocking access to the Grand Place in any vehicle. A few months later, the mayor Cooremans finally gave in. Who is complaining now?

We have there a beautiful precedent that would be faint-hearted not to emulate – with a modest start. With the arrival of spring, what would you think, for instance, about organising every Sunday a picnic at noon across the width of the Boulevard Anspach between the Bourse and the Place de Brouckère? It will suffice to explain politely to motorists that for once is not for them to impose their rule. To shake off an irresponsible lethargy, a bit of gentle civil disobedience is more than legitimate. Moreover, Brussels is full of talented musicians and actors who may well brighten the event, even with bad weather, and transform it into much more than a picnic or a walk. And to organize the whole, we`ll certainly find much better than an old philosopher: a handful of virtuosos of Twitter or of Facebook junkies, or some pioneers of flash mobs. In any case, I`ll be there. I have been in jail only once in my life. I look forward to going back, if necessary, for a cause like this. Who is willing to accompany me?

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