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# Anarchism in Belgium

Erik Buelinckx

2009

As in surrounding countries, the anarchist movement in Belgium had its beginnings around the mid-nineteenth century. Belgium, created in 1830 by what started as partly a proletarian revolution which quickly turned into a bourgeois one directed by the superpowers of that time, adopted a rather liberal constitution, mainly regarding freedom of speech and publishing. Belgium was one of the first industrialized countries, and over the following decades it became attractive to fleeing revolutionaries from all over Europe. Until 1848, paternalistic bourgeois led the workers' organizations. In the 1850s there were the influences of Utopian socialists like Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), Charles Fourier (1772–1837), and Victor Considérant (1808–93), later followed by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's sojourn as a political refugee from 1858 to 1862, and the publishing of many of his works in Brussels. Of special interest, too, was the rationalist socialism of Hippolyte Colins (1783–1859).

Free-thinkers and socialists shared a common "enemy" – clergy and capital – and founded together L'Affranchissement (1854) where strong figures like Nicolas Coulon (1816–90), Jan Pellerin (1817–77), and Désiré Brismée (1822–88) played an important role. Although differing in ideas, the main

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understanding was that education, organization, and material liberation were needed for intellectual liberation. Brismée, being more moderate, founded Les Solidaires (1857), and later a new organization, Le Peuple (1860), as well as a newspaper, *La Tribune du peuple* (1861), with Proudhonist influences.

A collaborator on *La Tribune du peuple* and a key figure in the emerging anarchism was the Flemish Cesar De Paepe (1841–90). In his Patignies speech (1863) he formulated a triple attack on state, church, and capital. In 1865 the Belgian workers' organization joined the new International, and in the following years their delegates were mainly to be found on the anti-authoritarian side. Several wildcat strikes broke out in the more industrialized regions, but the new organization wasn't always ready for these. De Paepe tried to establish a link between collectivism and mutualism, and at the 1868 Brussels congress his ideas prevailed, but this meant also a break with some French anarchists and internal disagreements for the Belgian delegates. At the 1872 congress in the Hague the Belgian delegates mostly took the anti-authoritarian and collectivist side. De Paepe was still not in favor of political action, and although he had contacts with Marx and Bakunin, their growing differences of opinion were also manifested with the Belgians. In 1874 De Paepe started to embrace social democracy to realize change.

The year 1877 saw a universal congress in Ghent, intended to unite all factions, and a more anarchist one in Verviers, the latter without Flemish representation, showing that language, regional identity, and the level and kind of industrialization were rather influential. Flanders and Brussels were around the turn of the century less anarchist than the Walloon part of Belgium, with Verviers and later Liège, although a strong but local group existed for a few years in Mechelen (Flanders). In Liège and the surrounding industrialized region a short period of direct action and illegalism followed the arrests of anarchist comrades during strikes and other revolts, with lots of wounded and 14

deaths (1886). Combined with the rise of the reformist Socialist Party using “universal” suffrage (for men) as a convincing argument to gather all “progressive” elements around the party line, this defeated any larger organized anarchist movement in Belgium.

After 1900 there was a renewed anarchist interest in syndicalism, but the centralizing activities from socialists, and later the outbreak of the war in 1914, made it too difficult to leave lasting anarchist influences in the unions. Specific for Brussels at the turn of the century was some kind of intellectual and cultural anarchism inside the regular Workers’ Party, through artistic contacts mainly with Paris. Kropotkin visited Belgium on several occasions, and Elisée Reclus (1830–1905) stayed in Brussels to teach for the Université Nouvelle. Also notable were the connections of Belgian-born anarchists such as Raymond Callemín (1890–1913), Jean De Boë (1889–1974), and Victor Serge (1890–1947) with the Bonnot Gang.

After World War I, anarchist activity diminished, but from the 1930s on, Hem Day (a.k.a. Marcel Dieu, 1902–68), Ernestan (a.k.a. Ernest Tanrez, 1898–1954), and Léo Champion (1905–92) kept it alive, injecting a strong anti-militarism. After World War II they published *Pensée et Action* (1945–70). Flemish anarchists were still more in contact with the Dutch movement, and the French-speaking anarchists with French anarchists.

In the 1960s anarchism gained momentum again, with influences from the Dutch Proves and the Paris May 1968 uprising. From the 1970s through the 1990s, however, the movement experienced ups and downs. Five times, “Days of Anarchy” were held in Brussels (1979), Mechelen (1980), Ghent (1981, 1983), and Leuven (1982), mostly around ecology, class war, social injustice, youth resistance, anarcho-feminism, and anti-militarism.

The alternative globalization movement was influenced by anarchist ideas, and in turn spurred a new generation of anarchists, this time using the latest technologies to spread their

ideas instead of the print format of magazines such as *Alternative Libertaire* (Brussels, 1976–2003) and *Perspectief* (Ghent, 1985–96). At present, both print and Internet are used, for example by *De Nar* (May 2008: issue 216) and *A voix Autre* (2005–). Every year, on May 21, the anarchist artist Jan Bucquoy, a friend of pie-thrower Noel Godin, stages a coup on the royal palace. In March 2008 the eighth annual anarchist book fair was organized in Ghent, and in May, the second Subversive Book Fair in Brussels.

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