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Abstract
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Reclaim the streets

It’s been 40 years since The Bulletin organised a sit-in on Brussels’ Grand’Place to protest against traffic, yet it provided the inspiration for last Sunday’s Picnic the Streets. Here’s what happened — and why

BY PHILIPPE VAN PARIS
PHOTOS BY FILIP VAN ZANDYCKE

On June 10, at noon, hundreds of people started sitting down in the middle of Boulevard Anspach in Brussels, in front of the Bourse. At their peak, they were between 2,000 people, with their kids, their blankets, their sandwiches and their salads — some even with their garden chairs and barbecues. The picnic was a Facebook event, coordinated by a handful of young Brusselitans. It was meant as an act of protest. No permission had been asked to hold it. Politicians from every political party expressed their support, however, and after some hesitation, Brussels’ mayor, Freddy Thielemans, declared that the picnic was “an absolutely charming idea” and would be, though not authorised, tolerated. Police were present, but to gently redirect traffic, not to jail the picnickers.

This extraordinary happening was not quite unprecedented. On a smaller scale, another picnic had been held for analogous reasons more than 40 years ago on Brussels’ Grand’Place. In its issue of May 7, 1971, The Bulletin launched a petition expressing indignation at “the world’s most beautiful car park” being permanently spoiled by traffic. The petition was signed by many Brusselsers, including Jacques Brel. As the city administration refused to budge, The Bulletin organised a “sit-down protest” in the form of a picnic, pressuring the politicians to enter the Grand’Place. Success was not immediate. It took several months for then-mayor Lucien Cooremans to finally give in. But the outcome was relentless. On a smaller scale, another picnic had been held in the Grand’Place. In its issue of May 7, 1971, The Bulletin launched a petition expressing indignation at “the world’s most beautiful car park” being permanently spoiled by traffic. The petition was signed by many Brusselsers, including Jacques Brel. As the city administration refused to budge, The Bulletin organised a “sit-down protest” in the form of a picnic, pressuring the politicians to enter the Grand’Place. Success was not immediate. It took several months for then-mayor Lucien Cooremans to finally give in. But the outcome was relentless.

In Brussels, as in other cities, no major progress in this direction can be made without freeing large spaces from traffic and parking, either permanently or at certain hours or on certain days. Cars keep killing pedestrians and cyclists, not only by occasionally mowing them down, but above all by constantly injecting dirt into their lungs. Moreover, cars spoil the pleasure citizens can take in walking around their city they chatter up public space, they disfigure the landscape and bombard our cars with their noise.

Driving a car in the city centre must cease to be the rule. It must become an exception only justifiable by a specific reason: the transportation of a disabled person, for example, or of heavy objects. In Brussels, as in other cities, there are dreams and plans that are going in the right direction. But it is high time to move faster and more vigorously. As the capital of a troubled European Union, Brussels has a special responsibility to lead by example. These considerations inspired the suggestion I made on May 24 in Le Soir and Brussel DeZeek Week: why not hold a picnic every Sunday lunchtime across the width of Boulevard Anspach between the Bourse and Place De Broucker? It would suffice to politely explain to drivers that, for once, it is not for them to impose their rule. A touch of gentle civil disobedience is more than legitimate in response to irresponsible lethargy. Brussels is brimming with musicians and talented actors who could brighten up the event, even in gloomy weather. They could make it much more than a simple picnic or passeggiata. And to organise all this, I conjectured, there are certainly people far better equipped than an old philosopher: a handful of Twitter virtuosos, perhaps, or Facebook addicts, or flashmob pioneers.

Sure enough, they managed it, and beautifully or at least more of a passeggiata. And to organise all this, I conjectured, there are certainly people far better equipped than an old philosopher: a handful of Twitter virtuosos, perhaps, or Facebook addicts, or flashmob pioneers.

I hope this is only one of many initiatives, preferably organised by the city administration itself or, if not, in the same bottom-up way as this time. Whenever I can, I shall be there with my sandwich and, if necessary, my umbrella. Do join me!

Philippe Van Paris is a renowned philosopher, political economist and professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, where he has directed the Hoover Chair of economic and social ethics since its creation in 1991.

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