

THE CITY TAKING THE COMMONS TO HEART

ARTICLE BY
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The Belgian city of Ghent plays host to a broad range of projects and initiatives around the commons. But it has yet to adopt a model which really places a commons-focused approach and logic at the core of its institutions and processes. Recent work undertaken by experts on the commons provides a roadmap for the city to re-imagine and reconfigure its structures around citizen participation, the sharing of resources, and ‘translocal’ cooperation.

Michel Bauwens, one of the world’s experts on the commons and founder of the P2P Foundation, distinguishes at least three main reasons why cities would want to stimulate initiatives and projects related to the commons. First, these play an important role in the ecological transition, they allow for goods, workshops, and infrastructures to be shared. Second, they enable a faster transfer to a circular economy by sharing information about production chains, in addition to offering opportunities for local jobs and meaningful labour. And instead of outsourcing everything to private companies working with long supply chains, communal knowhow and coordination platforms allow the realisation of shorter supply and distribution chains. And finally, as the commons are based on open systems, they strengthen democracy and participation. What is still missing, however, in Ghent and elsewhere, is the ‘maker city’ model of the commons, namely a production model based on open design.



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GENT DRAAGT DE COMMONS EEN WARM HART TOE

Michel Bauwens stelt in zijn *Commons Transitie Plan voor Gent* dat nieuwe burgerinitiatieven enkel kunnen uitgroeien tot een echt alternatief als de overheid ze op innovatieve wijze ondersteunt.

A STRONG COMMONS COMMITMENT

Ghent, a city of 260,000 residents in Belgium, has a remarkable history of citizen initiatives and other forms of self-governance. In the

Middle Ages it was a big, wealthy city with over 50 guilds. During the industrial revolution it was the cradle of new labour movements and cooperatives. For some ten years now there has been a third wave of activity, now comprising over 500 citizen initiatives, ranging from an energy cooperative and a digital citizens' platform for car-sharing, to numerous local food initiatives.

At the political level, Ghent has a tradition of progressive parties, with a relatively large Green Party that has been on the scene for the last few decades. In the 2012 local election, a red-green 'cartel list' won the majority in the town council. It has been governing the city together with the Liberal Party on the basis of an innovative social-ecological city project. The progressive tradition translates into an open culture of policy-making, leaving Ghent's 4,000 municipal workers quite some leeway to develop initiatives of their own and interact with citizens. All the same, Belgian cities' scope for policy-making, as well as their fiscal autonomy, is limited compared to a country like Denmark.

It is therefore no coincidence that Ghent city council, witnessing the proliferation of citizen initiatives, is the first city in the world to ask Michel Bauwens to devise a *Commons Transition Plan for Ghent*.¹ Bauwens and

his colleague settled in Ghent in the spring of 2017, talked to 80 Ghent commoners (citizens leading or involved in projects around the commons), held a survey on the nature of the commons and the role of the city, and interviewed various municipal services and town councillors. This resulted in a wiki of some 500 documented citizen initiatives.

The aim however was not just to map projects, as the research question was twofold and of a political nature. It first looked at the potentially new facilitating and regulating relationship between the local Ghent government and citizens to enhance the development of commons initiatives. It then asked if cities can be actors in social, economic, and institutional change at a time when nation-states are no longer capable of regulating the transnational economy. Can networks of cities be part of a new transnational governance model?

On the basis of research into the commons in numerous cities, Bauwens, for the purpose of his *Commons Transition Plan*, starts from two premises. First, the town council, the commons citizen initiatives, and quite a number of Ghent's residents are no longer purely local actors. They have become part of transnational and translocal networks, which together can exert influence on socio-economic changes worldwide. This is demonstrated notably in

¹ *Commons Transitie Plan voor de Stad Gent*. Michel Bauwens and Yurek Onzia. Ghent, Belgium: City of Ghent and P2P Foundation, 2017. https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/wp-content/uploads/Commons_transitieplan.pdf

up-and-coming ‘global design communities’. Local projects such as fab labs² are connected to global fab lab information flows, communities, and sometimes even coalitions. Second, cities can more consciously manage the way they cooperate. There are already examples in the field of climate policy or the regulation of Uber, but this can be taken much further. International coalitions of cities should be true institutions for translocal and global cooperation.

WILL YOU BE MY PARTNER (CITY)?

Appreciating commons initiatives is one thing, organising as a local government so as to offer structural support is quite another. This requires a fundamental shift in the culture and structure of government, for which Bauwens uses the concept of the ‘Partner State’, here transposed to the city as local government. The city is then no longer a territory which needs politicians behaving as managers; it is, first and foremost, a living community of creative citizens. This means that instead of privatising businesses or outsourcing to public-private partnerships, the aim is the development of public-*civil* partnerships.

In order to make Ghent a Partner City, Bauwens starts from what already exists in the city in terms of transition policy. In the context of its broader climate policy, Ghent for some years

has known *Gent en Garde* (Ghent and whisk), a sustainable food system strategy for the city. The central organ within this transition strategy is the *Voedselraad* (Food Council), bringing together all food chain stakeholders, hence consolidating the many existing and new initiatives around local food and the so-called short supply chains and bringing producers and consumers into contact with each other.

The Food Council, as the representative organ, also seats people within vested structures, who cannot or do not want to negotiate on an equal footing with the new commons initiators. That’s why a second organ is needed, the contributive organ, which in this case is the existing working group on urban agriculture. This independent working group itself is a coalition of various urban agriculture projects, experts, and committed citizens. It allows for the mobilisation of expertise in civil society in a power-neutral way.

Based on this existing structure and to boost civil participation, the *Commons Transition Plan* can help found two new institutions. First, the States-General of the Commons, organised by sector and acting as an umbrella. This is a platform designed for citizens who care for the commons and are committed to them. The second organ is the Chamber of the Commons, analogous to the existing Chamber

2 A fab lab (fabrication laboratory) is a small-scale workshop providing services and equipment for digital production.

of Commerce. In this Chamber, citizens sit as entrepreneurs, committed to the resilience and future of the commons economy.

The difference in perspective makes both institutions indispensable. By striving in this twofold way for more voice and influence, the contributive organ gains strength in its dialogue with the representative organ and the city. They make sure that there is co-creation and they erect a barrier against any long term encapsulation caused by policy-making. The whole scheme can be rolled out for many other sectors, with the public authorities being fed constantly by commons initiatives and ideas.

In addition to this, Bauwens proposes to copy successful institutions from Italian cities such as Bologna. First, a Commons City Lab, to support fresh, experimental commons initiatives, to devise commons agreements, and to disseminate successful initiatives and models. Second, the commons regulations, which endorse the right to initiate commons-orientated projects and regulate the supportive role of cities and other urban actors. The 'Right to Initiate' is a positive right which is not aimed at the replacement of public services, but harbours the values of 'care' and 'reform'.

WHERE THE CURRENTS MEET

It is a striking fact that whether it is about stimulating the commons or regulating the hyper-capitalist Airbnbs of this world, cities are taking the lead. So it's London rather than the British government that has the nerve to take action against Uber if it violates existing rules. Cities being in the van-

guard is no coincidence. Even if there are more reasons at play, the fact that a local council is more easily approachable for citizens than a national government certainly has something to do with it; conversely, for a mayor it is easier to engage local actors in policy-making.

This pragmatic response, however, conceals an ideological aspect, which in my book *Vrijheid & Zekerheid* (Freedom and Certainty) I describe as the 'Land of Two Currents'.³ In Europe there is both a dominant neoliberal main current and an alternative counter-current. The main current is formed by most national governments, international institutions, and big corporations. National governments find themselves in the strait-jacket of the Maastricht Treaty values (placing monetary objectives before social and ecological ones). Urban governments

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³ *Vrijheid & Zekerheid. Naar een sociaalecologische samenleving* (EPO, 2016, in Dutch). Dirk Holemans. An English essay with the core elements of the book will be available at the end of 2017 on the website of the Green European Foundation (Ecopro project): www.gef.be

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have more autonomy in that sense; it is simply impossible for lobbyists of large corporations to be present in every city. The city is the place where a multitude of sustainable citizen initiatives start and, like small streams feeding into a larger river, come together to strengthen each other. It's mostly the local governance level – which is closest to the citizens – which joins this undercurrent. It's also the place where local alternatives can successfully develop into a real political alternative. The election of Ada Colau as mayor of Barcelona, running on the citizen platform *Barcelona en Comú*, is an illustration of how this can take place.

JOINING FORCES

If cities want to be an active part of a novel form of transnational governance, then they have to actively found multi-city commons coalitions. This is at the same time a pragmatic proposal: as commoners and entrepreneurs take initiatives and create local standards, the need increases to make them strong enough and allow them to operate in a classical profit-orientated environment, which shifts social and ecological cost (externalities) onto society. Cities and the commons initiatives can only attain real relevance when they succeed in pooling their knowhow and infrastructure. Jointly, cities might for example support the development of open source software platforms allowing the setting-up of working commons systems for, say, car-sharing and bicycle-sharing, minting complementary coins, or the management of food production in short-chain agriculture, from seeds to online sales.

Part of this will mean sharing knowhow about the commons approach in various towns and cities. Then we can see which regulations and new institutions work most effectively in supporting commons initiatives. As a useful example, Bauwens refers to the coalition of 16 large cities signing the *Barcelona Pledge* and its FabCity model, which aims at relocalising half of the production of food by 2054.

THE NEW TRANSLOCAL HORIZON

The importance of the *Commons Transition Plan* that Michel Bauwens devised for Ghent clearly transcends its local character. The new institutional structures that Bauwens proposes, in particular, are of crucial importance. It is clear that after a ten-year increase in citizen initiatives, Ghent needs new structures to channel this energy so as to change society and its economy in the direction of a more honest, sustainable, and shared future. All the proposed innovations at the city level will absorb a lot of time and energy from local commoners, governments, and generative entrepreneurs. There is a big danger here of everyone recognising the importance of the expansion of translocal networks, but not getting round to making them a reality. In his plan, Bauwens mentions the need for the translocal networks in addition to what has to happen in the city itself. It would be important to anchor the translocal aspect in every new institution from the start.

However, more cooperation is necessary to develop the counter-current needed. Essential in this respect are networks of cities cooperating with university networks to develop and share the necessary knowledge and design. If tomorrow 20 towns and cities allocate funds to develop, say, a digital platform for an alternative 'Fairbnb', and then implement it in cooperation with the urban commons actors, then there is real political leverage by a counter-current against the neoliberal actors. That is the

real struggle we are facing and the lesson to be drawn from the 1970s. In those days there was also, from the energy of what today we refer to as 'May 68', a broad spectrum of civilian actions and initiatives, staking a claim to more space for citizen autonomy in relation to government and economy. If this space was won in the field of, say, new rights (gay marriage, flexible career options, euthanasia...) in a number of countries, then in the field of the economy the reverse has happened – citizens have lost ground. By organising globally, the power of the business sector has grown far above and beyond both that of the nation-state and of self-organising citizens. If the new wave of citizen movements is to acquire real power, then it will have to organise itself translocally from the beginning, whereby coalitions of cities with clear political and economic objectives take the lead. This will require an awareness and continuous attention on behalf of Green activists and politicians, which should underpin all of their actions.



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His most recent book is *Vrijheid & Zekerheid*.