

Andalusia, Spain:

Among Anarchists, Socialists, Feminists and Climate justice activists

In May 2019 I traveled to Andalusia in Spain in order to do a workshop on civil disobedience for climate justice activists in Sevilla and to link up with some resistance communities. Additionally, I gave a talk at the University of Granada, at their Peace and Conflict Studies Institute. (https://www.ugr.university/pages/research_innovation_transfer/research_institutes_centres/the_peace_and_conflict_research_institute).

In Sevilla I stayed with an old friend Andrea(s), a queer activist, antimilitarist veteran, nonviolent action trainer and online techie who provides services to activist groups through a cooperative. Andrea(s) is a non-binary queer person, who succeeded in getting registered in their birth country of Germany as a gendered “other”, instead of the conventional binary option between “male” or “female”. Germany is among the first countries in the world to recognize a third gender in official documents, whereas in India and Pakistan a third gender has existed culturally for a long time. Now this creates a problem when Andrea(s) lives in Spain, where everyone has to either register as “male” or “female”. So, this is something that they are fighting in a legal process right now. Currently Andrea(s) is writing a Spanish handbook for nonviolent action campaigns. This hopefully will be spread widely in the anti-authoritarian movements in Spain, despite its “German” style, with a lot of theory and references.

Andrea(s) lives in a small activist community in the old town of Sevilla, so it was possible to take walks among old beautiful houses and narrow streets. One day we took an activist-oriented city walking tour, checking out places where struggles against the Franco fascists occurred, old squats and activist centers, and the abundance of graffiti and posters in this area of the city formed by a leftist subculture.

During one of the days in Sevilla, which was a Friday, we joined the global movement of *Fridays for Future* together with striking school kids. A lot of older people like me joined in to protest the climate crisis and walked in solidarity with the kids, the leaders of our future. We gathered at a central square. People worked on their individual and creative banners, old friends greeted each other, smiled, chatted and smoked. While we waited we looked with envy to the other side of the street, where a much larger crowd of people were lined up in a queue waiting to get into a TV broadcast music show. Then we gathered and listened to some short and strong statements while reporters interviewed several activists. Finally we started to walk, shouting slogans through the city center, feeling the power of our committed crowd. We circled around the city center, passed lines of waiting cars held up by the police and after about an hour we ended up in front of the local parliament. There the traditional speeches occurred, although wisely enough, not too many or too long. Of course, no one showed up to meet the protest from the parliament, so we scattered and went home. All in all a good, typical – and ritualized – protest demonstration. It is an old form of resistance that was once novel, controversial and powerful when it first appeared in history, about 200 years ago. Today, it seems very doubtful to me that such types of demonstrations are still as important, and if they are at all connected to social transformation anymore, especially these days when they are so common. In any case, this does not seem to affect their popularity. Demonstrations happen all over the world, conducted by all types of people, articulating all kinds of demands; with the ritual of marching from point A to point B in



major cities, the shouting of slogans, carrying of banners and posters, and the speeches from leaders of organizers. On the other hand, when millions gather all over the world in student strikes and protests against irresponsible government inactions as we face the climate emergency, they might indeed have an impact. Perhaps. At least while we walk together we might feel empowered, have fun and get some healthy exercise ...

The feeling was a lot different during the May 1st demonstration in Sevilla. That was a total spectacle. Despite feeling this slight irritation with the ritual of protest demos, I had a premonition that a May demo in anarchist Sevilla would have a more creative energy, and I was right. You could already feel the energy, commitment and joy when we gathered in a working-class neighborhood. People stood in groups, gathered around their particular left-wing ideological fraction, favorite flags and banners. The mood was good and full of expectation. Some were rehearsing drum beats with their music group. Samba is the choice all over the world nowadays, an inheritance from two decades ago at the global justice movement and World Social Forum, I believe. Others stood around, talked and were catching up with friends. Andrea(s) and I went into the store and gathered water and some snacks for the long hot day that awaited us. After enjoying an energetic samba group, and some chanting rehearsals, I was intrigued by an unusual sculpture in the middle of it all, which was placed on the ground on a wooden frame. Andrea(s) explained to me that it was a creatively decorated vulva or vagina (!)... and that the first procession in 2014 in Sevilla with a vagina like this one got sued by a group of conservative Catholics. The



legal process is still not settled, but the women of the “Brotherhood of the Blessed Rebellious Vagina” are facing the risk of jail time for their procession. The march started, and we joined in with the feminist, queer, anarchist and sex worker section. As we started to walk in rhythm to the drums, chanting the slogans, being enfolded by the playful energy of a May demonstration

in Sevilla, I realized that this once unique, powerful and beautiful feminist display of vaginal



power in Catholic Spain has not been repressed. Because of the legal and political repression, it has actually grown into seven (7!) vaginas, only in this particular demo in this city Sevilla ...

What a feeling of rebellion! There were thousands of us joining this celebratory party-demo, and the feeling of empowerment was clear. I am indeed skeptical of protest marches, but this one I loved. The approach was different. Instead of tricking participants into believe that protest marches in a liberal democracy will change anything of importance, this demo was a celebration of

community, resistance, solidarity and joy. All the celebration seen makes sense for those who have worked hard for socialism year round since the last May demo. Who does not need inspiration and new energy? After walking in the sun for an endless time, shouting and singing, we joined some of the activists at a local bar, drinking cold beer and discussing the feminist politics of vaginas... A beautiful day!

For a full day Andrea(s) and I did a training or workshop on nonviolent direct action for climate justice activists in Sevilla. It was a mixed group of about 30 activists from the area who came to an activist community house in the old town, close to where we were staying. We sat in a big circle and worked through an intensive program of basic theory, illustrating examples, discussing themes in groups, and doing exercises. Since both Andrea(s) and I are experienced trainers in nonviolent activism and come from a similar North-Western European tradition it was easy to prepare the agenda together, and we were thinking similarly about how to do it. The input of theory ("lectures") were very short, and the focus was on the interactive, participatory

discussions and practical training exercises. However, with our German-Swedish time discipline we had trouble adjusting to the more relaxed timing style of the Spanish group, so we had to skip some parts since we did not have enough time to go through it. Still, the participants were happy with the training and it gave them some idea of what kind of preparations they could use when doing more climate justice activism in Andalusia, now that the movement is growing so fast.

The next day, Andrea(s) and I borrowed a car from a friend, and traveled out to Marinaleda, which looks like an ordinary village outside of Sevilla. Marinaleda is a town of 2,600 inhabitants, and a self-described communist utopia with full employment, communally owned land, an abolished police force and wage equality. In the 1970s people occupied their land, blocked roads, occupied airports, went on hunger strikes and fought the rich land owners to eventually gain the rights to their own land. They formed an agricultural cooperative and adopted their socialist principles. For example, they created housing for all, including the possibility of putting in work hours as payment if one did not have the money to get their own apartment or house, and a ban on selling houses for profit. While the village looks like any other, the values they live by is pretty radical. After decades they are still there and they keep the socialist spirit alive. Their charismatic Mayor has, for example, led activists in raids to supermarkets, stealing food in order to give to poor and homeless people.

We came for a brief visit since I wanted to see the place I had heard of so many times over the years and talk to someone that could tell their story. We met up with Juan at the main



cooperative building on a hill, close to the Street of Utopia. We got a guided tour of their production facility, a food processing plant. In the building they had machines with the capacity to process the vegetables that they grow themselves (artichokes, olives, beans, etc.), which they sell and distribute all over the country. They also make their own wine. We went to a meeting room to talk, and passed

through the workers break room. In this room it was odd to see Pepsi and Nestle vendor machines, while in the meeting room their own products were on display. We were told the story of how they struggled together and how the principles of the village were formed, how they still try to stay in touch with other socialist, peasant and agricultural struggles of today and bring international visitors to the village to learn from them .

When we asked about the gender relations in the village we were assured they were completely equal and that they had no problems with gender injustice. That is hard to believe in a country like Spain that suffers under a strong patriarchy. Unfortunately we did not get any explanation of how they had struggled to achieve that amazing result. Also, it was reported from a male representative of the town, but this was not something we could look more into during our short visit. Of course we got an official and cleaned-up version, as that is what happens if you just drop in and have a chat for an hour without staying around and learning about the everyday life of a place. In any event, it was clear that they felt proud of what they have achieved, that they still struggle to survive economically and to find ways of connecting to and being relevant in the struggles of today, and that they are preoccupied with maintaining and enjoying their daily socialist life.

When Andrea(s) and I drove back to Sevilla through the country side covered by farm land and small villages, we talked about what we had experienced. Both of us were impressed, yet a bit doubtful in what way this was “utopia”. It is clear that Marinaleda belongs not to a traditional but a more radical version of the left. Having turned the workers struggle into more than just a matter of improved salaries and working conditions, the workers self-governance and daily life is formed by their beliefs. They have succeeded in staying economically resilient over decades, and maintaining their values. It also seemed like a village that wanted to blend in, despite having counter cultural values. There are



unusual street names in the town, with an impressive set of socialist revolutionary's names and a cultural center decorated with a sign about building "utopia". However, if you did not talk to people you would not understand that you were actually in a socialist village. Their few shops look the same as in any other place, the houses and the processing plant are not clearly different in any visible way and there are no banners or paintings or other visible signs of their radical politics.

The next day we took a bus towards Granada. We passed through what seemed like an endless landscape of olive tree farms and arrived in a city surrounded by impressive mountains. Here we were met by Diego, an activist scholar who works at the University of Granada, and enjoyed a dinner together at a local vegan gourmet restaurant. Then we walked for a long time through the famous old town of Granada, a model of multicultural life with a strong Arab presence, beautiful small paths uphill, old houses and lots of small shops. Of course it is also expensive since it is popular and tourist oriented. The next day we walked to the campus of the University of Granada through the city with a view of the mountains around us, some of them with snow still on the top. After meeting with some of the professors at the peace center, we had a panel discussion on antimilitarism. We particularly focused on how to get rid of the military and use its budget for social spending. Since people spoke very clearly when addressing me, my poor Spanish knowledge was good enough for me to understand the main points, while I had to speak in English.

I argued that since activists, politicians and academics have tried since the 1960s to get governments and generals to understand the potential of a national defense based on civil resistance and organized nonviolent activism to no avail, we should recognize that states will never shift militarism into non-military forms of defense. It can only be done through mass mobilizations of people, by proving the potential of people power, and from that base creating a civilian based defense. This position was not easily accepted, and led to some interesting discussion on the role of the state and civil society for social change. I enjoyed meeting the mixed international group of students participating, and learning about the interest in nonviolent

activism by the Peace Center at the university. It was refreshing since peace studies as an academic discipline has, after becoming established in the 1990s, evolved from a radical system critique and civil society orientation into a more state reform-oriented critique of militarism and war. A return to a focus on peaceful and radical resistance by civil societies is necessary if peace studies is going to be relevant for the creation of peace and justice in the future, as peace studies professor Richard Jackson argues in the first issue of the *Journal of Resistance Studies*.

Then Andrea(s) and I went back to Sevilla, enjoying our routine of sitting at their open roof top terrace under the night sky, eating cheese, bread, olives and salad, discussing activism, life and politics of the revolution. One night we had a party with his community of friends, singing along with videos of old Spanish hits from female singers, drinking wine and laughing wildly together. I enjoyed taking part in this very human activity, a fundamental way in which activists stay sane, build resilience and community: eating, drinking and having a good time together.

Another night we fulfilled a dream of mine, and enjoyed a live music performance of Flamenco in a local bar in the old town of Sevilla. That was amazing since it became very intimate in this small packed place which could only hold about 40 people. The combination of the passion, sadness, aggression, dignity and intensity of Flamenco was fantastic. Flamenco is very traditional and strong in Andalusia, historically linked to oppression, migration, slavery and the Roma people. Normally you would find this in a designed package for tourists, whereas this was the authentic, local and integrated activity of everyday life. It felt like the appropriate way to end a refreshing visit to Andalusia.

Stellan Vinthagen

Professor of Sociology and the *Inaugural Endowed Chair in the Study of Nonviolent Direct Action and Civil Resistance* at The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, U.S.A.