Raoul vaneigem: The Other Situationist

Jason McQuinn
where in industrial societies. It issued from a will to transform the world and change life.”

Class struggle is not a metaphysical given. It is the cumulative result of actual flesh-and-blood personal decisions to fight enslavement or submit to it. Those who wish to reduce these personal decisions to effects of social laws, metaphysical principles, psychological drives or ideological dictates are all our enemies to the extent that we refuse to submit. And we do refuse.

Raoul Vaneigem’s *Treatise on Etiquette for the Younger Generations* is now available from LBC Books—the publishing arm of Little Black Cart Distribution—at: http://lbcbooks.com/ 310 pages, Digest format. $12
social dictates of conduct, codified and enforced by institutions of
domination. They are sociologies of mechanical human behavior.
No significant, non-trivial sociology of autonomous self-activity is
possible, since there is no possibility of predicting genuinely free,
autonomous activity. This means that while Marxism may attempt
to investigate, analyze and interpret human activity under the insti-
tutions of modern slavery—using scientific, dialectical or any other
semi-logical means—it cannot tell us very little of any detailed signi-
ficance about what the abolition of capital and state might actually
look like. And to the extent that Marxist ideologies demand any
particular forms, stages or means of struggle they will always nec-
essarily make the wrong demands. Because the only right forms,
stages and means of struggle are those chosen by people in revolt
constructing their own methods. Council communism, as a form
of Marxism, is not essentially different from the other ideologies of
social democracy on this score. Nor, for that matter, are all the vari-
ous ideological variations of anarchism struggling for an increased
share in the ever-shrinking leftist-militant market.

Vaneigem himself understands to a great degree what is at stake
here. This is one major reason Vaneigem’s text still inspires anar-
chists around the world. And the reason we decided to serialize the
original translation of his Treatise in Anarchy: A Journal of Desire
Armed back in the ‘80s. As he explains in his introduction:

"From now on the struggle between subjectivity and what de-
grades it will extend the scope of the old class struggle. It revitalizes
it and makes it more bitter. The desire to live is a political decision.
We do not want a world in which the guarantee that we will not die
of starvation is bought by accepting the risk of dying of boredom."

And, in the first chapter of his Treatise:

"The concept of class struggle constituted the first concrete, tacti-
cal marshaling of the shocks and injuries which men live individu-
ally; it was born in the whirlpool of suffering which the reduction
of human relations to mechanisms of exploitation created every-

Contents

The Situationist myth ........................................... 5
The Situationist reality ........................................ 8
The SI theorists: Guy Debord or Raoul Vaneigem ........ 12
Raoul Vaneigem and the revolution of everyday life .... 15
traditions within Marxism. Of the latter, it was the council communists in particular, whose politics were largely adopted by the SI. And this is where the deep ambiguity of the SI is based. All of Marxism—including its dissenting minorities, and all of its myriad splinters, both mainstream and marginal—is fundamentally based upon the unavoidable sociological perspectives of species, society and class.

All Marxism begins and ends with these abstractions. This is counter to the broad libertarian tradition, where actual people—with all their messy lives and struggles, hopes and dreams—are necessarily the center of theory and practice. This is the real “unbridgeable gap”—as the sectarians so love to put it. But it is between the ideologically constructed, abstract subjectivity of reified concepts (like society and the proletariat) and the actual, phenomenal, lived subjectivity of people in revolt together. The SI was never able to overcome this divide.

Nor was Vaneigem’s Treatise. But Vaneigem did make it farther than anyone else at the time in his text. If it hasn’t yet ever been made clear enough, then now is the time to finally put to rest the necessarily ideological nature of any and every reified collective subject, whether religious, liberal, Marxist, fascist or nationalist, reactionary or revolutionary. And this isn’t a question of adopting a methodological individualism over a methodological holism. One or the other may or may not be an appropriate choice for any particular specific investigation or analysis, depending upon one’s goals. But beginning with a reality defined in terms of an abstracted species, society or class makes no more sense than beginning with a reality defined in terms of abstract individuals. The only reason sociological investigations, analyses and theories can tell us anything beyond the most obvious banalities is the extent to which they reflect the dominant forms of enslavement in a society of modern slavery. "Scientific," "objective" descriptions incorporating sociological explanations for mass human behavior depend upon predictable patterns of human action based upon broad
Raoul Vaneigem’s *Treatise on Etiquette for the Younger Generations* has, despite its epochal importance, often been overshadowed by Guy Debord’s equally significant *Society of the Spectacle*. And Vaneigem himself, along with his wider insurrectionary and social-revolutionary contributions, has too often also been overshadowed by Debord’s very successfully self-promoted mystique. As a result Vaneigem’s contributions have been rather consistently under-appreciated when not at times intentionally minimized or even ignored. However, there are good reasons to take Vaneigem and his *Treatise* more seriously.

### The Situationist myth

A half-century ago in 1967 two related books appeared, authored by then-obscure members of the Situationist International (hereafter, the SI). Each has made its permanent mark on the world. On the one side, a slim but dense book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, appeared under the authorship of one Guy Debord—an avant-garde film-maker, but more importantly the principle theorist and organizer from its earliest days of the tiny “International” of curiously-named “Situationists.” On the other side, a how-to book on living “for the younger generations,” describing a surprisingly combative “radical subjectivity” in extravagant and often poetic language. The latter was originally entitled Traite de savoir-vivre a l’usage des jeunes generations, but was initially translated into English as *The Treatise on Etiquette for the Younger Generations*.

---

1. *The Treatise on Etiquette for the Younger Generations* is the title of the new LBC Books edition of Raoul Vaneigem’s Traite de savoir-vivre a l’usage des jeunes generations, for which this essay was originally written as an introduction.
2. *La Societe du Spectacle* was first translated into English as *The Society of the Spectacle* by Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak (Black & Red, 1970; rev. ed. 1977), then by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Zone, 1994), and finally by Ken Knabb (Rebel Press, 2004).
Revolution of Everyday Life, appearing under the authorship of Raoul Vaneigem. Both books exemplified a savagely critical and creatively artistic, historical and theoretical erudition rare among the usual offerings of then still new New Left. But stylistically the books could hardly have been more different, though they ostensibly argue for the same end: inspiring the creation of a social revolution which would both destroy capitalism and realize art in everyday life!

Only a short year later the anarchistic (though fairly incoherent) March 22nd Movement and the charismatic "Danny the Red" (Daniel Cohn-Bendit), along with a small group of more coherently-radical, reinvented Enrages (who were proteges of the SI), helped incite spreading student protests, initially from the University of Paris at Nanterre to the Sorbonne, and then throughout France. A protest that soon led to the tumultuous—now semi-mythical—"May Days" as student strikes and street protests were amplified by a huge wave of wildcat strikes that became a general strike and severely threatened the stability of the Gaullist regime. Situationist themes more and more frequently appeared in this social ferment. They were expressed not only in SI books and pamphlets, but most importantly through increasingly widespread graffiti, posters, occupations and other interventions. "Power to the imagination." "Never work." "Boredom is counterrevolutionary." "Live without dead time." "Occupy the factories." "It is forbidden to forbid." "In a society that has abolished every kind of adventure the only adventure that remains is to abolish that society." "I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires." "Under the paving stones, the beach." Wherever one looked the SI’s slogans were urging the rebellion forward! While most other supposedly "radical" groups were peddling the same old (or the same old)
capitalism, Vaneigem sought in his Treatise on Etiquette for the Younger Generations to elaborate the subjectively-experienced, phenomenal connections between most of these same aspects of capitalist society. In Society of the Spectacle this meant Debord focused on: description of contemporary capital developing new forms of commodity production and exchange, the increasing importance of consumption over production, the integration of the working class through new mechanisms of passive participation, particularly the development of spectacular forms of mediation -communication and organization, and the overarching integration of these new forms of production and exchange in a continually developing, self-reproducing sociological totality which he called "spectacular commodity society." Vaneigem’s innovation is the systematic description of these same developments from the other side, the side of lived subjective experience in everyday life: phenomenal descriptions of humiliation, isolation, work, commodity exchange, sacrifice and separation he has himself undergone or suffered, which help readers interpret their own experiences similarly.

Raoul Vaneigem and the revolution of everyday life

Raoul Vaneigem’s Treatise was a first, exploratory 20th century attempt at the descriptive phenomenology of modern slavery and its refusal. Through the Treatise Vaneigem urged rebellion against

16 Debord borrowed heavily from the Socialisme ou Barbarie group’s flirtation with council communism, or councilist social democracy. He was a member of S. ou B. for a time.

17 Vaneigem’s is so far the best update of Max Stirner’s original nineteenth century phenomenology of modern slavery and autonomous insurrection, Der Einzige and Sein Eigenthum, mistranslated into English as The Ego and Its Own. (A more accurate translation would be The Unique and Its Property.) Although Vaneigem mentions Stirner in his text, it is unclear how well he understands Stirner’s intent, and how much he has been influenced by Stirner.

3 Traité de savoir-vivre a l’usage des jeunes generations was first translated into English by Paul Sieveking and John Fullerton as The Revolution of Everyday Life (Practical Paradise Publications, 1979), then by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Rebel Press/Left Bank Books, 1994) and (Rebel Press, 2001).
and incorporating any critique of everyday life in the authoritarian, bureaucratic and inevitably unimaginative mainstream left is one major reason for its own steady decline.) The unfinished synthesis and critique of the SI is just one of many unfinished syntheses and critiques which litter radical history from 1793 to 1848, from 1871 to the great revolutionary assaults of the 20th century in Mexico, Russia, Germany, Italy, China and Spain. Certainly, as Vaneigem argues in his Treatise, there has to have always been "an energy...locked up in everyday life which can move mountains and abolish distances." Because it is never from purely sociological forces that revolutions spring. These forces themselves are mere abstract, symbolic formulations concealing the everyday realities, choices and activities of millions of unique individual persons in all their complexity and interwoven relationships.

Despite Guy Debord's increasing fascination with the austere, rationalistic sociological theorization revealed in The Society of the Spectacle, his entire commitment to the critique of art and everyday life, and his genuine search for new forms of lived radical subversion guarantee a substantial understanding of the central importance of Vaneigem's work for radical theory. Still, though I know of no libertarian radicals who deny the critical importance of Debord's work, there remain plenty who minimize, or even denigrate, the importance of Vaneigem's. What is it in Vaneigem's poetic investigations of the insurrectionary and social revolutionary possibilities of refusal and revolt in everyday life that so threaten these would-be libertarians? Could it be that these supposedly radical libertarians—whether "social" anarchists or some form or other of non-orthodox Marxists—may not be so different from the decaying mainstream left as they imagine?

Whereas Debord used his Society of the Spectacle largely to update Lukacsian Marxism by elaborating the sociological connections between some of the more important aspects of modern "new") leftist lines and rituals which usually, like the Stalinists in the French Communist Party, amounted to urging restraint and respect for their leaderships. Or at most, the urging of politically-correct, "responsible" agitation, respecting the limits of directly democratic procedures which tolerated the inclusion of Leninists, Trotskyists, Stalinists, Maoists and liberal reformists of all types, guaranteeing their incoherent impotence.

Only hints of social revolution were really ever in sight during the May Days, despite the recurring waves of violent street demonstrations and the widespread students’ and workers’ occupations that culminated in the massive (but in the end, frustratingly passive) general strike across France. However, even hints of social revolution are never taken lightly, as otherwise sober governing bureaucrats began to panic, and at least the thought of revolution began to be taken seriously by the general population. A survey immediately following the events indicated that 20% of the French population would have participated in a "revolution," while 33% would have opposed a "military intervention."4 Charles De Gaulle even fled at one point for safety in Germany before returning to France once he had ensured the backing of the French military. These hints of revolution were especially powerful when much of the world was watching while experiencing its own various waves of anti-war protest, constant student and worker unrest, and a creative cultural contestation that at the time (throughout the 1960s at least) had as yet no very clear limits. Then it all quickly evaporated with the excuse of new national elections welcomed by all the major powers of the old world in France: the Gaullists, the Communist and Socialist parties, the established unions, etc.

As it turned out, in the 1960s most people in France, like most people around the world, were not ready for social revolution, though a few of the more radical of the French anarchists, the En-

---

rages and the Situationists had made a decent effort to move their world in that direction. In the end, neither the more radical of the anarchists nor the Enrages and Situationists proved to be up to the task. And the historic trajectory of radical activities through the ensuing half century is still grappling with the question of just what it will take. But it remains hard to argue that, among those who even tried, it wasn’t the Situationists who were able to take the highest ground in those heady May Days in 1968.

The Situationist reality

The Situationist International, created in 1957, was a grouping of various artists from a number of tendencies— influenced by Dada, Surrealism and the Lettrists—who to one degree or another wished to suppress art as a specialized activity and realize art in everyday life. The group published a journal titled Internationale Situationiste from its beginning, founded by Guy Debord, who was the dominant (and sometimes domineering) personality within the organization. At first, the Situationist emphasis was largely a continuation of the radical Lettrist investigations into filmmaking, psychogeography5 and unitary urbanism,6 including the development of a theory and practice of creating situations, in conjunction with

5In his 1955 essay, “Introduction to a critique of urban geography” (originally appearing in Les Leve nues #6), Guy Debord suggests that: “Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The adjective psychogeographical, retaining a rather pleasing vagueness, can thus be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.” (Ken Knabb, editor and translator, Situationist International Anthology, 1989, p. 5.)

6Unitary urbanism consists in an experimental “critique of urbanism” that “merges objectively with the interests of a comprehensive subversion.” “It is the foundation for a civilization of leisure and play.” (unattributed, “Unitary Urbanism at the end of the 1950s,” Internationale Situationiste, #3, December 1959.)

have yet to come across anyone claiming to similarly criticize Debord based on any ideas or analyses from Vaneigem). The so-called “Vaneigemists” seem to be lumped into this category on the basis of an alleged tendency to see potential signs of total revolt in minor or partial refusals within everyday life.14 along with a resulting exaggeration of the potentialities of radical subjectivity for the construction of an intersubjective revolutionary subject. At its extreme, the argument equates radical subjectivity with attempts at narrowly ”personal liberation” or even bourgeois egoism, implying that any true participation in the construction of a collective revolutionary subject demands the complete subordination of one’s personal life to a rationalist conception of revolution.15 While the former argument would seem to be largely a question of emphasis (just how important can refusals within everyday life actually be for potential social revolutionary upsurges in comparison to mass sociological factors), the latter appears to verge on the negation of most of what is distinctive and innovative within the Situationist project!

At the least these conflicts reveal an underlying tension that was never resolved within the SI. This underlying tension between the sociological and the personal, between the idea of a collective or social revolutionary project and a revolution of everyday life, still remains the central unresolved problem of the libertarian social revolutionary milieu to this day. (The impossibility of including

14See Ken Knabb’s translator’s introduction to the third chapter of Raoul Vaneigem’s From Wildcat Strike to Total Self-Management, included in Knabb’s Bureau of Public Secrets web site at: http://wwwbopsecrets.org/CF/selfmanagement.htm

15“Vaneigemism is an extreme form of the modern anti-puritanism that has to pretend to enjoy what is supposed to be enjoyable...Vaneigemist ideological egoism holds up as the radical essence of humanity that most alienated condition of humanity for which the bourgeoisie was reproached, which ‘left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest’...”—page 256 of Ken Knabb, “The Society of Situationism” published in Public Secrets (Bureau of Public Secrets, 1997).
the fact sometimes bordered on megalomania, at least there were
reasons for misjudgments about the SI’s actual effectiveness. They
were not merely figments of imagination.

The SI theorists: Guy Debord or Raoul Vaneigem

That the two most important theorists of the SI were Guy De-
bord and Raoul Vaneigem is indisputable. Of what their contribu-
tions (and their relative values) consisted is another matter. At first,
during the heat of the struggles in France the meanings of their
contributions were generally considered to be so similar as not to
require much analysis. However, it didn’t take long—especially af-
after Vaneigem left the SI in 1970—for divergent lines of interpreta-
tion to form and attributions or accusations of “Vaneigemism” and
”Debordism” to begin flying in some quarters. The pro-Debordists
tended to emphasize the overriding importance of Marxism to the
Situationist project, along with a resulting accompanying empha-
is on sociological analysis and critique of class society centering
on Debord’s concept of the spectacle. It was also from this direc-
tion that most talk of Vaneigemism seems to have come (in fact, I
understood them, rather than constructing their own autonomous theoretical
and practical activities. This includes most of the Situationist-inspired activities
in the SF Bay area in the 1970s wake of the SI’s own dissolution. There was
a proliferation of tiny pro-sit groups like the Council for the Eruption of the
Marvelous, Negation, Contradiction, 1044, the Bureau of Public Secrets, Point
Blank!, The Re-invention of Everyday Life and For Ourselves. Most Situationist-
influenced anarchists at the time (for example, Black & Red in Detroit, and a bit
later John & Paula Zerzan’s Upshot, the Fifth Estate group, Bob Black’s Last In-
ternational, the group around Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed, and others)
stood apart from these interesting attempts to carry on the Situationist project in
a very different North American social, political, economic and cultural situation,
if for no other reason than basic disagreements with the SI’s Marxism, council-
ism, fetishization of technology, ideological rationalism, inadequate ecological
critique and seemingly complete ignorance of indigenous resistance. (Which is
not to say that Situationist-influenced anarchists didn’t have their own, often
equally-debilitating problems.)

By the time the SI disbanded in 1972 Guy Debord and Gianfranco San-
guinetti (relatively new to the organization) were the only remaining members.

7
radicals—including Mustapha Khayati, Rene Vienet, Rene Riesel9 and Gianfranco Sanguinetti10—signed on to the project.

From its beginning the Situationist International fully embraced a practice of scathing critique and scandalous subversions. And at the same time, initially through the impetus of Guy Debord, the SI at least attempted to incorporate and integrate many of the more radical social ideas of the time into its critical theory. Before the SI appeared, the Lettrists had already become notorious for the blasphemous 1950 Easter Mass preaching the death of God at the Cathedral of Notre Dame by ex-seminary student Michel Mourre.11 The subsequently-organized Lettrist International (including Debord) launched its own little blasphemous attack on the aging cinema icon Charlie Chaplin in 1952, interrupting his press conference by scattering leaflets titled “No More Flat Feet.” By the time the SI had settled on its final radical trajectory, explosive events like the 1966 through 67 Strasbourg scandal—which culminated in the funding of 10,000 copies of Mustapha Khayati’s Situationist attack On the Poverty of Student Life12 by the University of Strasbourg Student Union—were inevitable. The massive SI graffiti, posterizing and publishing campaigns from March through May of 1968 can be seen as the culmination of this line of attack.

At the same time, the SI’s exploration, incorporation and integration of scandalously radical social theory paralleled its practice of subversive scandal. Although the backbone of Situationist theory remained Marxist, it was at least a Marxism staunchly critical of Leninist, Trotskyist, Stalinist and Maoist ideology and bureaucracy, and a Marxism at least partially open to many of the more radical currents marginalized or defeated by the great Marxist-inspired counterrevolutions experienced around the world. Along with the avant-garde art movements like Dada and Surrealism, there was room for at least the mention of a diversity of anarchists and dissident non-Leninist Marxists, radical poets, lumpen terrorists, and even transgressive characters like Lautreamont and de Sade in the Situationist pantheon. It can be argued that it was the coupling of its penchant for scandalous incitements with its shift from experimental artistic practices to developing a more and more radically critical theory that made for whatever lasting success the SI attained. Certainly, the creatively subversive gestures without the radically critical theory, or the radically critical theory without the creatively subversive gestures would never have captured imagination as did their serial combination and recombination. It should also be noted that although the SI obviously was not the creator of the May Days in 1968 France, the SI was the only organized group which had announced the possibility of events like these, and which was actively agitating for them before they occurred. Although some pronouncements by Debord and other Situationists, and some comments by enthusiastic “pro-situationists”13 after