

What's Free is the Absolute Weapon

An interview with the former situationist by one of his old buddies

Raoul Vaneigem, Siné Mensuel

2011

A member of the Situationist International from 1961 to 1970, Raoul Vaneigem is the author of *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (Gallimard, 1967),¹ from which the most forceful slogans of May 68 were drawn, and around thirty other books. The most recent to appear is *L'État n'est plus rien, soyons tout* (Rue des Cascades, 2011).²

Siné Mensuel: Can you give a brief definition of the situationists?

Raoul Vaneigem: No. The living is irreducible to definitions. The vitality and radicality of the situationists continues to develop behind the scenes of a spectacle that has every reason to keep quiet and conceal itself. On the other hand, the ideological recuperation that this radicality has been subjected to has experienced a superficial surge, but its interests have nothing in common with mine.

Siné Mensuel: What did the *situs* mean when they said that situationism doesn't exist?

Raoul Vaneigem: The situationists were always hostile to ideologies, and to speak of situationism would be to place an ideology where there isn't one.

Siné Mensuel: Why did you break with the Situationist International in 1970? In hindsight, what do you think of Guy Debord?

Raoul Vaneigem: I broke [off] because the radicality that had been the priority in May 1968 was in the process of dissolving into bureaucratic behavior. Each member had chosen to pursue his route alone or to abandon the project of a self-managed society. Perhaps Debord and I felt more complicity than affection, but the split doesn't matter! What is sincerely lived is never lost. The rest is only the dregs of futility.

Siné Mensuel: What's your take on the Movement of the Indignant?³

Raoul Vaneigem: It is a public-safety reaction against the resignation and fear that provide the tyranny of capitalism with its best supports. But indignation isn't enough. It is less a matter of struggling against a system that is collapsing than in favor of new social structures founded upon direct democracy. While the State is destroying public services, only a self-managing movement can take charge of the well-being of everyone.

¹ Translated as *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1983) by Donald Nicholson-Smith.

² *The State is no longer anything, we are everything*. Not yet translated into English.

³ A series of spontaneous demonstrations in Spain, involving tens of thousands of people, starting on 15 May 2011.

Siné Mensuel: Is utopianism still on the agenda?

Raoul Vaneigem: Utopianism? From now on, that's the hell of the past. We have always been constrained to live in a place that is everywhere but, in that place, we are nowhere. That's the reality of our exile. It has been imposed on us for thousands of years by an economy founded on the exploitation of man by man. Humanist ideology has made us believe that we are human while we remain, for the most part, reduced to the state of beasts whose predatory instincts are satisfied by the will to power and appropriation. Our "veil of tears" was considered the best possible world. Could we have invented a way of living that is more phantasmagorical and absurd than the all-powerful cruelty of the gods, the caste of priests and princes ruling enslaved peoples, the obligation to work that is supposed to guarantee joy and substantiate the Stalinist paradise, the millenarianist Third Reich, the Maoist Cultural Revolution, the society of well-being (the *Welfare state*⁴), the totalitarianism of money beyond which there is neither individual nor social safety, [and] finally the idea that survival is everything and life is nothing? Against that utopia, which passes for reality, is opposed the only reality that matters: what we try to live by assuring our happiness and that of everyone else. Thenceforth, we no longer are in a utopia, but at the heart of a mutation, a change of civilization that takes shape under our eyes and that many people, blinded by the dominant obscurantism, are incapable of discerning. Because the quest for profit makes men into predatory, insensitive and stupid brutes.

Siné Mensuel: Explain to us how what's free [*la gratuité*] is, according to you, the first decisive step towards the end of money.

Raoul Vaneigem: Money isn't simply becoming devalued ([diminished] buying-power proves it); it invests itself so savagely in the bubble of stock-market speculation that it is doomed to implode. The tornado of short-term profit destroys everything in its path; it sterilizes the earth and hardens life so as to extract useless benefits. Humanely conceived, life is incompatible with the economy that exploits man and the earth for lucrative ends. Unlike survival, life gives and gives itself. What's free is the absolute weapon against the dictatorship of profit. In Greece, a "Don't Pay" movement is developing. At its beginning, the car-drivers refused tolls; they had the support of a collective of lawyers who sued the State, which was accused of selling the highways to private firms. Today it is a question of refusing to pay for public transportation, of demanding free health care and education, of no longer paying taxes and duties that serve to bail out the embezzled banks and enrich the stockholders. The fight for pleasure in oneself and in the world doesn't pass through money, but, on the contrary, its absolute exclusion.

It is absurd that a strike obstructs the free circulation of people while it could decree free public transportation, health care, and education. It is necessary that we understand — before the financial crash that is coming takes place — that what's free is the absolute weapon of life against the economy. It is not a question of breaking men but breaking the system that exploits them and the machines that make them pay.

Siné Mensuel: You advocate civil disobedience. What does it mean to you?

Raoul Vaneigem: It is what's going on in Greece, Spain, Tunisia and Portugal. It is what summarizes the title of the pamphlet I wrote for our libertarian friends in Thessaloniki: *The State is Nothing; We Are Everything*. Civil disobedience is not an end in itself. It is the road towards direct democracy and generalized self-management, that is to say, the creation of conditions that are propitious for individual and collective happiness.

⁴ English in original.

The project of self-management begins its realization when an assembly decides to ignore the State and, on its own initiative, puts in place the structures that are capable of responding to individual and collective needs. From 1936 to 1939, the libertarian collectives of Andalusia, Aragon and Catalonia successfully experimented with self-managing systems. The Spanish Communist Party and Lister's army crushed them, opening the way for Franco's troops.

To me, nothing seems more important today than the implementation of self-managing collectives capable of developing themselves when the monetary collapse makes money disappear and, along with it, a way of thinking implanted in our behavior for thousands of years.

Siné Mensuel: You disapprove of the carceral system, but in 1996, following the Dutroux Affair,⁵ you participated in the "White March" in Brussels that, according to the French press, demanded greater prosecution of pedophilic acts. Isn't this contradictory?

Raoul Vaneigem: This is a good example of an obvious journalistic counter-truth. If the parents of the victims of Dutroux had demanded the death penalty for the assassin, the crowd would have agreed. Thus, the opposite took place. I admire the courage and humanity of Gino and Carine Russo [parents of one of the victims], who are resolutely opposed to the death penalty (they have even warned that they wouldn't accept it if the murderer was eliminated by the other prisoners, as is the custom). The "White March" was an extremely rare example of a popular emotion that [directly] refused pedophilia and predators in the name of humanity, and not indirectly through penal repression. There was a dignity there, in contrast to the populist ignominy that consists in using emotion to promote brutish repression, vengeance. Today, where does one see a collective reaction that denounces the strategy of the scapegoat, which, in order to prevent the anger of the citizens from focusing on the ruinous racketeering mafias, sounds the alarm bell of fear and security so as to designate the other, the foreigner, the "different" – Jew, Arab, Gypsy, homosexual or, if need be, simple neighbor – as a potential threat and enemy?

Siné Mensuel: You have several children. Do you not find it cruel to deliberately give birth to new beings in this world?

Raoul Vaneigem: I loathe the pro-birth politics that, by mechanically multiplying children, condemns them to poverty, to sickness, to disaffection, and to military, sexual and work-related exploitation. Only religious, ideological and criminal [*affairiste*] obscurantism finds those politics to their advantage. But I refuse to allow a State or an authority of any kind to impose its ukases on me. Each person has the right to have children or to not have them. The important thing is that they are wanted and engendered with the consciousness that everything will be done to make them happy. There are new generations – completely different from the generations that were the fruits of familial authoritarianism, the cult of predation, and religious hypocrisy – that today are in the process of opposing the liberty of living according to their desires against market totalitarianism and its political yes-men.

Siné Mensuel: Tell us about animal rights [*la cause animale*], which revolutionary thinkers have not taken into account for a long time.

Raoul Vaneigem: It is less a question of animal rights than a reconciliation of man with a terrestrial nature that he has exploited for lucrative purposes until today. What has hindered the evolution of man towards a veritable humanity has been the alienation of the body put to work, the exploitation of the life force transformed into a productive force. Our residual animality has

⁵ Marc Dutroux is a currently imprisoned child molester and child killer. It took the Belgian police and judicial system an extraordinarily long time to apprehend and prosecute him for crimes he committed in 1995 and 1996.

been repressed in the name of a spirit that is only the emanation of a heavenly and temporal power charged with taming terrestrial and corporal matter. Today, the alliance with natural energies is preparing to supplant the plundering of vital, planetary resources. To rediscover our relationship with the animal kingdom is to reconcile with the animal inside us; it is to refine it instead of oppressing it, repressing it, and condemning it to the cruelties of blowing-off steam. Our humanization implies recognizing the animal's right to be respected, in its specificity.

Siné Mensuel: In Belgium, voting is obligatory, in principle at least. Have you ever voted? Do you pay the fines?

Raoul Vaneigem: I never vote. I have never received a fine.

Siné Mensuel: What lessons can be drawn from this long year, in which Belgium has had no government?⁶

Raoul Vaneigem: None. During the lucrative sleep of the politicians – those 55 government ministers don't have problems making ends meet – the financial mafias have continued to make laws and do very well with the yes-men at their command.

Siné Mensuel: How do you see the on-going "revolutions" in the Arab countries? Does it seem to you that Islam is a threat to them?

Raoul Vaneigem: Where the social carries the day, religious preoccupations fade. The liberty that is currently getting rid of secular tyranny isn't disposed to accommodate itself to religious tyranny. Islam will try to democratize itself and will experience the same decline as Christianity. I appreciate the Tunisian slogan "Freedom to pray, freedom to drink!"

Siné Mensuel: Finally, you remain an irreducible optimist, don't you?

Raoul Vaneigem: I can content myself with Scutenaire's formula:⁷ "Pessimists! What did you expect?" But I am not an optimist or a pessimist. I don't give a fuck about definitions. I want to live by beginning again each day. It will be necessary that the denunciation and refusal of our insupportable conditions yield their place to the working out of a human society that is an absolute break from market society.

⁶ Split in two geographically and politically – Flanders (Flemish Nationalist) and Wallonia (Socialist) – Belgium hasn't had an official government since the parliamentary elections of 13 June 2010.

⁷ Note by *Siné Mensuel*: the Belgian writer Louis Scutenaire (1905–1987) is the author of *Mes inscriptions*. Raoul Vaneigem devoted a book to him in the "Poets Today" Collection (Seghers, 1991).

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