

“We Have No Other Alternative Than to Dare the Impossible”
Complete text of interview given to *Le Monde*
by Raoul Vaneigem¹

Q: What is the nature of the mutation, the collapse, that’s now taking place? In what sense is the end of a world not the end of the world, but the beginning of a new one? What is the civilization that you see dawning timidly on the ruins of the old one?

A: The Occupations Movement, which was the most radical tendency of May 1968, although it failed to implement the project of the self-management of everyday life, can nevertheless claim to have attained a considerable importance. It raised an awareness that marked a point of no return in the history of humanity. The massive denunciation of the *welfare state*² – the state of consumerist wellbeing, happiness on credit – dealt a mortal blow to the virtues and behaviors that had been imposed for millennia and passed for unshakeable truths: hierarchical power, respect for authority, the patriarchy, the fear of and contempt for women and nature, the veneration of the army, religious and ideological obedience, contention, competition, predation, sacrifice, and the necessity of work. The idea became clear that real life can’t be confused with survival, which reduces the lot of women and men to beasts of burden and predators. People believed that this radicalness had disappeared, swept away by internal rivalries, power struggles, and sectarianism; we have seen it suffocated by the government and by the Communist Party, which was the final victory. This radicalness, it is true, was especially devoured by a formidable wave of triumphant consumerism, the very one that, today, is slowly but surely being dried up by increasing pauperization. It was

¹ « Nous n’avons d’autre alternative que d’oser l’impossible » Raoul Vaneigem interviewed by Nicolas Truong, *Le Monde*, 31 August 2019. Note: the day after this interview was published, Vaneigem issued a public statement – “In the written interview that Raoul Vaneigem accorded the newspaper *Le Monde* (published on 31 August 2019), a question and the entirety of the response to it were suppressed, without informing the author. Thank you for diffusing this information.” – and published the entire interview in *La Voie du Jaguar*:
<https://lavoiedujaguar.net/Integralite-de-l-entretien-accorde-par-Raoul-Vaneigem-au-journal-Le-Monde-paru>. Translated by NOT BORED! 11 September 2019. All footnotes by the translator, except where noted.

² English in original.

forgotten that the fanatical incitation to consume carried in itself the deconsecration of older, established values. Factitious liberation, preached by the hedonism of the supermarket, propagates an abundance and a diversity of choices that has only one inconvenience: you must pay for them on the way out. From whence came a model of democracy in which ideologies wear themselves out to the profit of candidates whose promotional campaigns are conducted according to proven advertising techniques. Cronyism and the morbid attraction of power succeeded in ruining a form of thinking of which the most recent government has no fear of exhibiting an alarming deterioration. The passage of five decades has made people forget that, underneath proletarian consciousness, crushed by consumerism, there exists a human consciousness whose long lethargy hasn't prevented it from suddenly resurging. Market civilization is nothing more than the clattering of a machine that destroys the world in order to shred it into stock profits. Everything seizes up from the top down. What comes from the bottom, what takes its substance in and from the social body, is a sense of humanity, a priority of being. But being doesn't have its place in the bubble of having, in the cogs of wheeler-dealer globalization. The fact that the life of the human being and the development of her consciousness now proclaim their priority in the on-going insurrection is what authorizes me to evoke the birth of a civilization in which, for the first time, the creative faculty that is inherent in our species will be liberated from the oppressive tutelage of gods and masters.

Q: Ever since 1967, you've kept describing the agony of market civilization. And yet it endures and develops more and more every day in the era of financial and digital capitalism. Aren't you a prisoner of a progressive or teleological vision of history that you share with neo-liberalism, despite combating it?

A: I only make labels, categories and other storage drawers for the spectacle. The inconvenience of a system that seizes up is that its dysfunctioning can last a long time. A number of economists continue to scream bloody murder about an unavoidable financial crash. Catastrophism³ or not, the implosion of the monetary bubble is in the offing. The fortunate effect of a capitalism that continues to swell to the bursting point is that, like the government that, in the name of France, represses, condemns, mutilates, pokes in the eye and impoverishes the French people, it incites those on the bottom to defend their everyday existence above all

³ Perhaps an allusion to the book by Jaime Semprun and René Riesel (like Vaneigem himself, a former member of the Situationist International), *Catastrophisme, administration du désastre et soumission durable* (Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 2008).

else. It stimulates local solidarity; it encourages people to respond with civil disobedience and self-organization to those who profit from misery and poverty; it invites taking into one's own hands the *res publica*,⁴ the public thing that is ruined more every day by the swindles perpetrated by the financial powers. If the intellectuals like to debate fashionable concepts in the sad arenas of egotism, that's their right. Allow me to be more interested in the creativity that, in the villages, neighborhoods, towns and regions, is reinventing teaching, which has been destroyed by the closure of schools and prison-camp education, restoring public transportation, discovering new sources of free energy, propagating permaculture by renaturing the lands that have been poisoned by the agriculture industry, promoting market gardening and healthy food, and celebrating mutual aid and joyful solidarity. Democracy is in the streets, not in the ballot box.

Q: You have been someone who has denounced those who, in the revolutionary movements and insurrectional groups, perpetuate Stalinism and even the fashion in which Trotskyism, for example, covered over the repression at Kronstadt.⁵ Is speaking of “democratic totalitarianism” or “prison-camp greed” with respect to our world an adequate way of describing reality or merely revolutionary one-upmanship?

A: Denouncing oppressors and manipulators no longer seems necessary to me because the lie has become obvious. Anyone can use what you might call the “Trump Scale”⁶ to measure the level of mental deficiency among the falsifiers, without any recourse to moral judgment. But that's not what's important. Years of dumbing-down [*décervelage*] were needed before Goebbels could estimate that “the bigger lie, the better it is believed.” Anyone who today can see the state of the hospital system and can hear the promises of ministerial improvements will have no difficulty understanding that treating the masses of people like they're imbeciles can only emphasize the psycho-pathological devastation of the people in power. I have had no other choice than to wager on life. I can believe that there exists – underneath the role and function of cop, judge, prosecutor, journalist, politician, manipulator, tribune, expert in subversion – a human being who increasingly has no tolerance for the absence of lived authenticity that condemns him or her to the alienation of the lucrative lie. Concerns with one-upmanship, with capital gain, are

⁴ Latin for “commonwealth.”

⁵ An important anti-Leninist uprising that took place in Kronstadt, Russia, in March 1921.

⁶ That would be Donald J. Trump, the self-avowed 45th President of the United States of America.

foreign to me. I'm not the leader or manager of a group, nor a guru or a master thinker. I sow my ideas without being preoccupied with whether or not the soil on which they fall is fertile or sterile. Which is to say, I quite simply have good reason to rejoice at the appearance of a movement [the Yellow Vests]⁷ that isn't populist – as desired by the troublemakers of a chaos that is conducive to scheming – but that is a popular movement, which has from the beginning declared that it refuses self-proclaimed leaders and representatives. That is what reassures me and comforts me in the conviction that my personal happiness is inseparable from the happiness of everyone else.

Q: Why has a sterile confrontation between “paramilitary Leftism” and “hordes of police officers” been the rule, especially since the demonstrations against the work law?⁸ And how do we move beyond this stalemate?

A: The technocrats persist in tormenting the people, as if it were a beast trapped by their arrogant impotence, with such cynicism that we can only be surprised by the moderation displayed by popular anger. The *black bloc*⁹ is the expression of an anger that police repression is intended to arouse. It is a blind anger that the mechanisms of global profit have easily defeated. Breaking symbols¹⁰ doesn't break the system. Worse than stupidity, it is a hasty satisfaction, hardly satisfying, frustrating; it is the diversion of an energy that would be better spent in the indispensable construction of self-managing communes. I feel no solidarity with any paramilitary movement and I wish that the movement of the Yellow Vests, in particular, and popular subversion, in general, don't let themselves get carried away by a blind anger in which the generosity of the living and its human consciousness become bogged down. I wager on the expansion of the right to happiness, on an “insurrectional pacifism” that makes of life an absolute weapon, a weapon that does not kill.

⁷ Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, “Everything is possible, even self-managing assemblies in the middle of street intersections, villages and neighborhoods,” 28 December 2018: www.notbored.org/yellow-vests.pdf.

⁸ The CPE, a measure to deregulate the labor market in France, February-April 2006.

⁹ English in original.

¹⁰ When you target very specific “symbols” (banks or the offices of the World Trade Organization, for example), your anger can hardly be accused of being “blind.”

Q: The movement of the Yellow Vests: is it (or was it)¹¹ a revolutionary or reactionary movement?

A: The movement of the Yellow Vests is only the epiphenomenon of a social upheaval that consecrates the ruin of market civilization. It has only begun. It is still under the dazed gaze of the intellectuals, the debris of a sclerotic culture, who so durably cling to the role of supervisor of the people and who don't return the next day to be fired. Well, the people decided to have no other guide than themselves. They will grope around, babble, wander, stumble and get back up again, but they will have within themselves the light of the past, the aspiration to a real life and a better world that the emancipation movements of the past (repressed, trampled and crushed) have (in their broken momentum) entrusted to our present in order to take them up again at the source and bring them to a conclusion.

Q: Your conception of insurrection is both radical (refusal to dialogue with the State, justification of sabotage, etc.) and measured (refusal of armed struggle, anger reduced to smashing things, etc.). What are the limits of insurrectionary anger? What are your insurrectionary ethics? And what do you think of the writings published and the actions led for the last ten years in the wake of [the publication of] *L'Insurrection qui vient*?¹²

A: After the sudden rise of May 1968, the only insurrections I have seen are the appearance of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas,¹³ the emergence of a communalist society in Rojava,¹⁴ and yes, in a very different context, the birth and multiplication of ZADs, zones to be defended, in which the resistance of a region to the implantation of harmful environmental effects has created a solidarity of "living together."¹⁵ I don't know what an "insurrectionary ethics" means. We are only confronted with experiences that are full of joy and fury, developments and regressions. Two issues seem indispensable to me. How to prevent the onslaught of the governmental soldiers who devastate living places where what's free [*la*

¹¹ It continues to this very day.

¹² Comité invisible, *L'insurrection qui vient*, La Fabrique éditions, Paris, 2007.

¹³ The Zapatistas rose up and seized control of their community on 1 January 1994. It would appear that Vaneigem has visited Chiapas.

¹⁴ The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES), often referred to as Rojava, has been a de facto autonomous region in northeastern Syria since 2012. It would appear that Vaneigem has visited it.

¹⁵ Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, "Message of support for the ZAD at Notre Dames des Landes" (2018): <http://www.notbored.org/ZAD.pdf>.

gratuité]¹⁶ poorly accords with the profit principle? How to stop a society that preaches individual and collective autonomy from reconstituting within itself the old opposition between people with power and a base that has too little confidence in its own creative potential?

Q: Why is it necessary to go beyond machismo [*virilisme*] and feminism (neither patriarchy nor patriarchy)? And what do you mean by the inauguration of the “acritic¹⁷ preeminence of the woman”?

A: The trap of dualism is that it prevents any surpassing of opposites. I have not fought against the patriarchy so that it is followed by a matriarchy, which is the same thing in reverse. There is something of the masculine in the feminine and something of the feminine in the masculine – that’s a wide enough range for the freedom of amorous desire to modulate at leisure. What impassions me about men and women is their human character. You won’t be able to get me to admit that the emancipation of women consists in gaining access to what has so often rendered men contemptible: power, authority, and war-like and predatory cruelty. A female governmental minister, a State leader, a cop or a wheeler-dealer is hardly better than a man who held such a position for less than nothing. On the other hand, it is time to realize that there’s a relationship between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. They both appeared during the passage from pre-agrarian civilization to the agro-market civilization of the City-States. It seems to me that the society that is being sketched out today must, by virtue of a new alliance with nature, mark the end of *antiphysis* (anti-nature)¹⁸ and thus recognize in women a preponderance of acritics, that is to say, the absence of power, which they enjoyed before the inauguration of the patriarchy. (I have borrowed the word “acritics” from the Spanish libertarian current of that name.)¹⁹

Q: Why do you believe that the intellectual is “a poet who denies himself”? Why are intellectual controversies (from post-structuralism to feminism, from survivalism to animalism) vain?

¹⁶ Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, “What’s Free is the Absolute Weapon” (2011): <http://www.notbored.org/sine-mensuel.html>. Note: “what’s free” is my attempt to translate Vaneigem’s *la gratuité* (literally, “[the] free”).

¹⁷ In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, “akrasia” is acting against one’s better judgment.

¹⁸ In the works of Rabelais, *Physis* is joyful and unashamed, and *Antiphysis* is hateful and destructive.

¹⁹ Circa the 1880s.

A: Poetry is life. The intellectual praises himself for having a function as alienating as the manual one – both come from work and its division into tasks. Struggling with the body, whose impulses he tries to master instead of refine, he is a mind whose ideas – interesting though they might be – are cut off from the living and from the sensory intelligence that emanates from our vital impulses. The ideas “concocted by the head” nourish an abstract intelligence that never departs from the power than it intends to exercise over the body and the social body.²⁰

Q: You write, “the commune revokes communalism.” What allows you to think that, once the age of the self-management of life begins, problems – relations of domination of all kinds, animal mistreatment, identitarianism, misogyny, etc. – will be resolved? How will the emergence of a new style of life push to the side egotism, power and prejudice?

A: Nothing is ever assured, but human consciousness is a powerful motor for change. During a conversation with “Subcommandante Insurgente” Moises, at a Zapatista base in La Realidad, Chiapas, he explained, “The Mayans have always been misogynists. Women have always been inferior beings. To change this, we have had to insist that the women agree to exercise a mandate in the ‘Junta of Good Government,’ where the decisions of the assemblies are debated. Today their presence is very important, they know it, and never again will a man have the idea to treat them haughtily.” People have always identified progress with technological progress, which, from Gilgamesh to our time, is gigantic. On the other hand, if we judge by the gap between the populations of the first City-States and those who today are subjected to the laws of profit, progress of the sort reserved for what’s human is incontestably miniscule. Perhaps the time has come to explore the immense potential of life and to finally privilege the progress, not of having, but of being.

²⁰ Very close to the ideas of Annie Le Brun when she discusses Sade. Cf. for example, “What interests him [Sade] is seeing how thought is rooted in the body, how desire is at the origin of all representation and how forms are invented in the course of a battle between the head and the body” (Annie Le Brun, “‘Language remains a weapon that anyone can reclaim’: French Theory, Sade and Surrealism”): <http://www.notbored.org/language.pdf>.

Q: How is *Zapatismo* one of the most successful attempts at the self-management of everyday life? And is ZADism a *Zapatismo*?

A: As the Zapatistas themselves say, “We are not a model, we are an experiment.” The Zapatista movement was born from a Mayan peasant collective. It is not exportable, but we can draw lessons from the new society that it is trying to create. Direct democracy postulates the offer of authorized representatives who, passionate about a particular domain, propose to put their knowledge at the disposition of the collective. They are delegated, for a limited time, to the “junta of good government” in which they report the results of their efforts to the assemblies. Lands have been placed in common because of often-bloody conflicts that set owners of parcels against each other. The prohibition of [the use of] drugs dissuaded the intrusion of narco-traffickers, whose atrocities oppress a large part of Mexico. Women successfully argued for the prohibition of alcohol, which risks reviving the macho violence of which they were for a long time the victims. The Universidad de la Tierra de San Cristóbal provides free classes in the most varied fields. No diplomas are granted. The only requirements are the desires to learn and to share what one knows. There’s a simplicity capable of eradicating the bureaucratic complexity and the abstract rhetoric that tears us from ourselves our whole lives. Human consciousness is an on-going experiment.²¹

Q: Is it possible to stop the spiral of violence?

A: We must pose the question to the government and remind it of Blanqui’s remark: “Yes, gentlemen, it is war between the rich and the poor, the rich want it this way, they are indeed the aggressors. Only they consider it to be harmful action when the poor put up resistance. When speaking of the people, they will readily say: this animal is so ferocious that it defends itself if it is attacked.”²² Blanqui’s project, which preached armed struggle against the exploiters, merits being examined in the light of the conjoined evolution of capitalism and the workers’ movement, which struggled to annihilate it. The proletarian consciousness that aspired to found a classless society was, at a time when the productive sector still hadn’t given way to consumerist colonization, a transitory form in which history had [temporarily] clothed and invested [*revêtu*] human consciousness. It is this

²¹ *Note by Raoul Vaneigem*: The following question and my response were suppressed, without consulting me, from the newspaper published on 31 August 2019.

²² Auguste Blanqui, a French revolutionary (1805-1881). The quote comes from his statement to the Cour d’Assises, 1832.

human consciousness that today resurges in the insurrection of which the Yellow Vests are only a harbinger. We are witnessing the emergence of *insurrectionary pacifism*, which, armed only with an irrepressible will to live, is opposed to the destructive violence of the government. Because the State cannot and doesn't want to hear the demands of a people who are gradually being torn from what constitutes its public welfare, its *res publica*. Clearly it is precisely the human dignity and the stubborn determination of the insurgents that have spared the crooks of this Republic from a surge of violence that would hit them physically, right in their ghettos of dirty money.²³ At the height of absurdity are those who can find nothing better to do than to target a movement that spares them from a taste of their own medicine. They incite their guard dogs in the media and on the police forces. With impunity, they put eyes out, they imprison people, they kill them.²⁴ They multiply provocations by exhibiting their external and laughable signs of wealth in front of the poorest people. Doesn't their desire to recuperate, if not astutely encourage, the destroyers of garbage bins and shop windows demonstrate that they need – not a real civil war – but its spectacle, its staging? As everyone knows, chaos is good for business. The managers have no other support than profit, the inhumanity of which eats into them. They have no other intelligence than the money that takes its place. They are the barbarity whose usurped legitimacy the insurgents won't stop nullifying. Privileging the human being, organizing without leaders or self-proclaimed delegates, assuring the preeminence of the conscious individual over the bleating individual of the populist herd – for the on-going insurrection and for the populations of the earth, these are the best guarantees of the collapse of the oppressive system and its destructive violence.

Q: The climate is warming, biodiversity is eroding, the Amazon is burning with the active complicity of or [despite] the petitions of principles submitted by the governments. Can the struggle against the devastation of nature that mobilizes a large part of the population and the youth (in the West, but also worldwide) be one of the levers of the “pacifist insurrection” that you advocate?

²³ But see the incendiary attack carried out against the Bank of France by “Yellow Vests” in Rouen (29 December 2018): <https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/2405435-20181229-gilets-jaunes-incendie-porte-banque-france-heurts-police-rouen>.

²⁴ No exaggerations here. Cf. for example “Lost eyes... hands blown off: Injuries from ‘yellow vest’ clashes with French police mount,” *The Local*, 29 January 2019: <https://www.thelocal.fr/20190129/france-in-numbers-police-violence-during-yellow-vest-protests>.

A: The burning of the Amazon rainforest is part of a vast program of desertification that capitalist rapacity imposes on the nations of the entire world. It is laughable, to say the least, to address complaints to the very States that do not hesitate to devastate their own national territories in the name of the priority accorded to profit. All over the world, governments deforest the land, choke the oceans with plastic, and deliberately poison food products. Shale gas, oil drilling, gold mining, landfilling nuclear wastes – these are only details with respect to the degradation of the climate that each day accelerates the production of harmful environmental effects by businesses that are located close to us, within reach of the people who are their victims. The governors obey the laws of Monsanto and accuse a mayor who has prohibited the use of pesticides on the territory of his commune with a crime. His crime? Preserving the health of the inhabitants. That's where the fight is located, at the base of society, there where the will to live better springs from the precariousness of existence. In this fight, pacifism isn't out of place. I want to clear up any ambiguity here. Pacifism risks being mere pacification, a humanitarianism that extols a return to the doghouse for those who are resigned to their fate. Furthermore, nothing is less peaceful than an insurrection, but nothing is more odious than the wars conducted by paramilitary Leftism, whose leaders hasten to impose their power over the very people whom they boasted of emancipating. Sacrificial pacifism and armed insurrection are the two terms of a contradiction to be surpassed. Human consciousness will have progressed in an appreciable fashion when the supporters of bleating pacifism have understood that they give the State the rights to beat people up and lie every time that they indulge in the ritual of elections and, in accordance with the liberties of totalitarian democracy, choose representatives who only represent themselves and vote for public interests that must become private ones. As for the supporters of vengeful anger, we can only hope that, tired of the role-playing staged by the media, they learn and strive to bring the heat to the places where their blows truly affect the system: profit, profitability, the wallet. To propagate what's free is the most natural aspiration of life and the human consciousness of which it has granted us the privilege. The mutual aid and festive solidarity that are displayed by the insurrection of everyday life are weapons that deadly weapons cannot overpower. Never destroy a man and never stop destroying what dehumanizes him. Annihilate that which claims that we should *pay* for the inalienable right to happiness. Utopia? Take the question as you please. We have no other alternative than to dare [to do] the impossible or crawl like worms under the iron heel that crushes us.