

“For the Commune” By Raoul Vaneigem¹

A popular insurrection is winning the world. It is spreading to an increasing number of countries. Despite differences in conditions, motivations, cultures and mindsets, all share a common point: the people no longer want a government that purports to impose its presence and authority upon it. This is the struggle of those at the bottom against those at the top.

We are in the unstable equilibrium of the status quo. Oppressive power sets up camp on its positions; it refuses to give an inch. It fears a change in the situation. This change is within the reach of the popular uprising that taunts the State and, with the firmness of a justified anger, affirms its determination to pursue its fight without pause.

At first glance, it seems that the status quo works in favor of the State and its commanders. The intransigence of the governors aims at creating in the public mind the image of a permanent fortress that nothing will ever manage to shake. Their propaganda raises the specter of the despair that still haunts the memory of lost revolts. They bet on fatigue, they count on the bitter sentiment of “What good will it do?” to send the insurgents back to the doghouse. But our enemies are twice mistaken!

The solidity of the State is only superficial. Its decision-making power is artificial; it is in the hands of a global financial power that little by little substitutes itself for it. Many French citizens blame the European Commission and hold it responsible for their problems. Some reproach it for having imposed on “democratically elected” governments budgetary restrictions that ended up ruining the public sector, pauperizing it, killing it. But they forget that the European authorities are only instruments of the international financial mafias, which are our true enemies, as the economic assassin Milton Friedman revealed to the Chileans.² And yet, though they remain formidable, the managers of the market of which they are both the masters and the slaves deploy a real power less and less often and more and more rely on an artificial one, an authority whose staging is intended to fascinate us the way a snake hypnotizes its prey. But we have shown that we will no longer be prey and that we revoke predation. They, on the other hand, engage in wars of traveling salesmen. Both prey and predator, they wear themselves out in competitive rivalries and [then] tear themselves apart for a bone on which there will soon be nothing left to gnaw. Because the State and the supra-national authorities are on the lookout for the inevitable collapse of the system in which money goes round in circles, only reproducing itself, only a virtual form destined to devour itself by devouring everything in its path.

Increasingly stupid leaders, increasingly intelligent insurgents. The profitable bankruptcy of the market system doesn’t only cause the destruction of the earth and its species of life; it also causes a mental deterioration that, year after year, [increasingly] debilitates the administrators of universal dilapidation. They have been incapable of preventing a formidable insurrectionary wave from breaking the assault of their deadly businesses. You ask about the rocking effect [*l’effet de bascule*] of the old world in the new? It is slowly taking place under our very eyes. Heads of State and [other] leaders are overtaken by old age to the extent that their nerves of war

¹ “Pour la Commune,” a “text sent out for informational purposes and as a possible contribution to discussions about the commune,” undated, sent out 27 February 2020. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 29 February 2020. All footnotes by the translator.

² Cf. the alleged “Miracle of Chile” circa 1975-1982.

become hardened, while every day popular insurrection and civil disobedience display an intelligence that an openness to life doesn't stop stimulating.

The top is rotting away, the bottom reviving. Autonomous individuals demonstrate a creativity that leads the offensive under two angles of approach. At the top, critical analysis, legal action, sabotage and harsh ridicule denounce the swindles of this Olympian operetta; at the bottom, multiplying and growing local and regional assemblies directly confront the problem of human generosity in a society of egotistic calculation. This fight, which is both plural and unitary, nourishes the resolution of the insurgents – their determination to “never let up.” It is here that life demands its absolute priority over the economy of profit.

Creating new conditions of existence is a priority. The ruination of our established social rights and the *ukases*³ with which capitalism and its totalitarian democracy strike us give an idea of the chaos into which they want to throw us. Let's recall what's happened in Greece. Although it was supported by a popular majority that pressed it to leave the European Union, the Tsipras government⁴ backtracked and made a decision that was opposed to the popular will. It caved in to open blackmail: “If you don't accept the austerity measures that we recommend, you will leave Europe, you will no longer have any money, you will no longer be able to pay salaries, to maintain your schools, transportation systems or hospitals. After us, the deluge!”⁵ Tsipras had to cave in because Greek society wasn't prepared to avoid the programmed cataclysm. Isn't it worrisome that we did not draw lessons from this forecasted disaster? Mustn't our energy be principally employed in laying down the bases for micro-societies that are capable of responding to the challenges of the chaos and the absurd devastation of which the current conditions of the hospital, food and energy sectors have given us a foretaste?

The greatest danger facing us is a lack of nerve. Not having confidence in our own abilities, underestimating our own inventiveness. Waiting for solutions from the State condemns us to vegetating in its rotting carcass. How can we forget that the law of profit, which determines all the laws of the system, consists of taking back with one hand what was given with the other? Dialoguing with the State is entering the maw of the monster.

The important thing is not so much having our blows hit their targets than substituting for the State an ensemble of human micro-societies in which the freedom to live is applied to experiencing and experimenting with the wealth of its diversity and the harmonization of its contradictory options.

The swindle of referenda. In France, insurgents are demanding a *Référendum d'initiative citoyenne* (RIC).⁶ The government doesn't want to hear about it unless it takes the form of what it calls a *Referendum d'initiative partagée* (RIP)⁷ over which it would obviously have control. At the same time, this very same government shows its contempt for all referenda by rejecting a petition signed by more than a million people who are against the sale of the Paris airport to the

³ Edicts from the Czar in Imperial Russia.

⁴ Alexis Tsipras (born 1974), a Socialist and the Prime Minister of Greece from 2015 to 2019. The event to which Vaneigem refers, namely the Greek bailout referendum, took place in June 2015.

⁵ Allusion to a famous expression, variously attributed to King Louis XV and his lover, Madame de Pompadour, circa 1757 when the French lost a disastrous battle.

⁶ Referendum of Citizen Initiative.

⁷ Referendum of Shared Initiative.

private sector. In Chile,⁸ the same swindle is about to take place. The government is proposing to replace Pinochet's constitution by resorting to electoral farce and traditional manipulations.⁹ The goal? To impose from above a constitution that will serve to legalize capitalism's hold on the country's natural resources. Aren't we sick and tired of once again witnessing this magic trick that, in the name of the people, confers full power to the market? How can we ratify a popular constitution that isn't in fact drafted directly by the people through assemblies of neighborhoods and towns?

The fight for the quality of life¹⁰ laughs at the dictatorship of figures, measurements and numbers. The figure is power's yardstick. It reigns through quantities because it reigns over objects, over an anonymous mass of commodities. Today we are discovering a different perspective. Quality annuls the dictatorship of numbers. The quality of life laughs at budgetary accounting that reduces it to an element of profit-making. Quality is lived authenticity. As such it can indicate its interest in what concerns it and its disinterest in the wars of competition that the global mafias fight amongst themselves. Our interest lies in protecting ourselves from these wars, of which those at the bottom are always the victims.

In its most visible aspects, pacifist guerrilla struggle mobilizes hundreds of thousands of partisans of civil disobedience. Though media lies have assured everyone that the demonstrators are running out of steam and that their numbers are decreasing, neither France, Chile, Lebanon, the Sudan, Algeria, nor Iran¹¹ have given up on the front of demands. The demonstrators in these countries aren't mistaken about who their enemy is; their will is not weakening. Their adversary is the profit-making machine that destroys life; the battle is life refusing to be destroyed.

The depth of the phenomenon is increasing; it affects ways of thinking and behaving. A growing number of individuals are rediscovering the joys of solidarity and are becoming aware that lived reality has nothing in common with the countable, budgetary, statistical reality that has been concocted in [allegedly] high places, which are in fact only the dungeons of the market.

No self-proclaimed leaders or representatives. Self-organized assemblies exclude, in addition to leaders, political and organized-labor machines and those who are their delegates. On the other hand, the members of these assemblies are ready to discuss things in person with any individual, whether he or she is a militant activist or not, whatever his or her religious or ideological opinions. They in fact believe that the social struggle for a more humane and more generous society prevails over the representations of the world that each person has as the result of his or her own particular history. They do not call on people to renounce their personal convictions but to surpass them, that is to say, resituate them in conditions that will deny them in their old forms and conserve them in their new ones. Tolerance for all ideas; intolerance for any inhuman act.

⁸ For Vaneigem's comments about Chile, see "Unity and Differences in the Insurrections in France and Chile" (2020): <http://www.notbored.org/unity-and-differences.pdf>.

⁹ Cf. John Bartlett, "'The constitution of the dictatorship has died': Chile agrees deal on reform vote," *The Guardian*, 15 November 2019:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/15/chile-referendum-new-constitution-protests>.

¹⁰ *la qualité de la vie*: both the quality that life possesses and a high quality of life.

¹¹ All places in which large-scale protest movements have broken out in the last two years. For Vaneigem's comments on these countries, see "The rebirth of the human is the only growth that is acceptable to us" (2019): <http://www.notbored.org/renaissance.pdf>.

The Commune is the place of life rediscovered. It is an agora of freedom in which all opinions have the advantage of being expressed, heard, understood and concretized as part of collective decision-making. Why? Because right from the start the Commune assembles a small number of people who know already each other or become acquainted. They have the privilege of occupying a terrain that is familiar to them, somewhere where they are the best ones to intervene in a knowledgeable way. They have the advantage of being in a proximity to which the federation of Communes will lend a critical distance, a refined awareness.

Each Commune is the base for a multitude of similar entities. Their federation will form a social tissue that is capable of supplanting the State, which doesn't stop degrading the conditions of existence. It is here, on the terrain of our everyday existence, that our creativity has the best chance of demolishing governmental and market imperialism. The human being has always bent without breaking. This is the end of bending the neck,¹² this is the end of this world, in which the heart's only choices are to break or sunbathe, a fact which saddened Chamfort.¹³

The battle of the Commune is human generosity against the dictatorship of profit-making. We won't tolerate the fact that global capitalism and egotistical calculations pollute our environment and our human consciousness. Aid to the neediest comes from the popular assemblies, not from the cold governmental jurisdiction and its xenophobic, racist and sexist pimps. The urge to show solidarity brings an irrepressible and unusual feeling along with it: that life goes so quickly that we no longer have time to die. Insurrection is a health cure.

Women are at the forefront of the fight to be human beings. In this resides the fight's unity. It is a dissenting unity that threatens the macho tradition and patriarchal resurgences. It is not surprising that power tries to divide it into categories in order to set people against each other and "divide and conquer." Treating "women" as an abstraction in fact allows them to assume the roles and functions previously reserved for men. The human sense isn't present with the same intensity among cops, torturers, financial speculators, soldiers, Mafiosi, autocrats and insurgents who struggle for an equal emancipation of men and women. But everywhere that the kernel of humanity hasn't completely disappeared, why not have confidence that life will finally overcome the oppressive shell that contains it?

The Commune is our territory; our existence there is legal. For this natural legality, the State substitutes a legality that we are not obligated to recognize. Hasn't the social contract that required the State to guarantee schools, hospitals, modes of transportation and means of subsistence in exchange for tax levies – hasn't it become null and void? There is also the increasing number of arbitrary measures, detrimental to human dignity, taken by the State's democratic totalitarianism. Isn't it obvious now that legality is on our side and that the State is *de facto* the outlaw, which, from the point of view of its own laws, authorizes us to banish it? Nevertheless, the municipal structure that the State implanted is still in place. Within it, the mayor is [merely] a functionary subjected to its authority. Caught between the representation of the State and the representation of the local population, he or she must navigate between honesty and corruption, the modesty of the spokesperson and the arrogance of the well-established town councilor. How can the self-managing assemblies coexist in the framework of a municipal organization that is subservient to the State without abandoning their convictions? Each territory on the way to liberation will have its own forms of struggle.

¹² Cf. Genesis, 49:8: "You will force your enemies to bend their necks, and your own brothers will bow down before you." <https://www.bible.com/fr/bible/63/GEN.49.8.BFC>

¹³ Sébastien-Roch Nicolas de Chamfort (1741-1794), a French writer known for his aphorisms.

What kind of relationship should be had with the traditional City Hall? No one is unaware that the experience of direct democracy marks a break with the methods of voting that the electoral ritual imposes on us. Unlike the voting organized by political cronyism, the Commune is the expression of assemblies in proximity. The problems that they tackle are concrete problems faced by the population of a town, an urban neighborhood or the surrounding region, where their federation gives a global, overall vision to locally-taken decisions. They come from a milieu in which each person is concerned and knows what he or she is talking about. They concretize a practice of life, not of ideology. City Hall is an antennae; it is less receptive to citizens than to the State that governs them. Thus, for us, the Commune is a world called upon to eradicate the globalization of profit-making.

The drum of unity resonates everywhere. But what unity? Appealing for unity and the convergence of struggle is getting things backwards. Abstract declarations, no matter how generous they sound, are ploys. They follow the road of good intentions. Hope never stops stumbling from overconfidence to defeatism. Will we once again enroll ourselves in one of these fronts that is supposed to mobilize the energy of everyone against just one of the masks worn by global oppression? During the Spanish Revolution, Berneri¹⁴ issued this warning: “Only the anti-capitalist struggle can [successfully] oppose fascism. The trap of anti-fascism is its abandonment of the principles of social revolution.” And he added: “The revolution must be won on the social terrain and not the military one.” Where does the poetic force of the Yellow Vests¹⁵ and the self-organized assemblies come from? From the fact that they prioritize economic, social and psychological problems that no one can escape in these changing times (permaculture, the banning of pesticides, the blockage of market circuits, the eradication of petrochemical and nuclear hazards, the exploration of new forms of energy, the revivification of the rural and urban fabric, breaks with the fetishism of money, the reconstruction of education, a guerrilla war conducted according to the principle, “Never destroy a man and never stop destroying what dehumanizes him”¹⁶).

True unity is the fight for a better life.

Civil disobedience is an inalienable right, especially where the right to oppress reigns. The drafting of a charter that comes from the Communes and their assemblies could guarantee this principle and give its support to the legality of a democracy whose practical poetry has forever freed from the grasp of governments and markets.

Down with the Business Republic! Long live the Republic of the human being!

¹⁴ Camillo Berneri (1897-1937) was an Italian anarchist who fought alongside Spanish anarchists. For more about him, see the “Struggle Archive”: <http://struggle.ws/berneri.html>.

¹⁵ For Vaneigem’s comments about the Yellow Vests, see “Concerning the Yellow Vests” (2018): <http://www.notbored.org/yellow-vests.pdf>.

¹⁶ Here Vaneigem is quoting himself. Cf. “We have no other alternative than to dare the impossible,” his interview with *Le Monde* (2019): <http://www.notbored.org/RV-le-monde.pdf>.