

“Greece Learns to Do Without the State” An Interview with Raoul Vaneigem¹

***La Brique*: apparently things are heating up in Greece. Can you give us a little portrait of what’s going on there?**

Raoul Vaneigem: what’s going on in Greece, which the spectacular news media is trying to hide, is the beginning of a movement towards total self-management. And a certain reality is winning out over grand theoretical declarations and political ideologies. And that reality is this: the State, which used to use a portion of the taxes and fees that it took from the citizens to maintain schools, hospitals, public transportation, pension funds and social security benefits, now diverts that money to finance embezzlement from the banks. The public good is scrapped; every budget is cut down to increase the profits of the multinational mafias.

How are the people there reacting to this?

Faced with the bankruptcy of the State, which has become a simple instrument of repression funded and wielded by financial totalitarianism, more and more individuals are saying this: let’s take care of our affairs ourselves; let’s take charge of the social tasks that the State no longer undertakes. Greece, which has no anarchist tradition,² is discovering – not a libertarian ideology – but a manner of acting that does without the State and the entire political system that is subservient to it. The motor of this movement is the self-managed collectives and social centers. They are everywhere in Greece, especially in Athens.

Concretely, how does this take place? Who organizes life in these social centers?

The unemployed and volunteers manage them according to the principle of horizontality: neither leaders nor tribunes. Decisions are made by the assembly, in which everyone can participate. What is important in the collectives is services offered on a cost-free basis. Cost-free collective cooking (of great quality, with products that come from rural cooperatives); cost-free lessons to children, to unemployed people, to immigrants; cost-free films and shows; cost-free access to libraries; cost-free care in self-managed clinics; cost-free legal aid. Some collectives have vegetable gardens that are maintained by volunteers.

¹ Raoul Vaneigem, « La Grèce apprend à se passer de l’État » published by *La Brique* on 27 December 2014:

<https://labrique.net/index.php/thematiques/repressions/68-raoul-vaneigem-la-grece-apprend-a-se-passer-de-l-etat>. Translated by NOT BORED! on 6 April 2021. All footnotes by the translator.

² Not true. There was simply no anarchism in Greece between 1944 and 1967, during the reign of the military junta. Cf. Dimitris Dalakoglou, “Anarchism in Greece,” *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009):

https://www.academia.edu/2029152/Anarchism_in_Greece.

How does money circulate in these social centers? How can one make cost-free activities into a weapon against the market system?

In the self-managed centers, money doesn't circulate. There is a cardboard box into which everyone can, if he or she has the means, to place a few coins. I believe that this principle must be expanded into a general movement in which citizens refuse to pay the crook-State and instead create a depository that would serve the public good. Cost-free service is also a weapon against the economy. We start destroying the tollbooths on the highways and sabotaging the ticket-checking machines in the subways. The multiplication of collectives also propagates the notion of the cost-free.

Speaking concretely, who is mobilizing? Reading your works, one sometimes gets the feeling that, to get mobilized, it is simply enough to want to do.

On the walls in Athens, you can see the slogan "Self-management of everyday life," and I don't think that the collectives that have written this can be confused with the cretins or clerics of good will. Those who try to be human know that if they are going to destroy the economy of exploitation, they will do so by laying down the bases of a self-managed society, not by floundering around in the electoral and political shit that continues to maintain voluntary servitude.

In these self-managing social centers, do you see connections with the working classes?

There are centers that welcome all those who are experiencing difficulties. Some work with the existing neighborhood committees or create new ones. Others remain very isolated and have great difficulty breaking the bonds of despair and resignation. Athens has the greatest number of self-managed social centers, but the majority of the other cities have them, too.

These occupations are illegal. And so how do they survive?

They can be banned by legal decision at any time. As in any movement that advances by feeling its way, there are plenty of problems: there are too few established relationships between the collectives. If some of them become neighborhood committees, others remain relatively isolated. Obviously illegal, the occupations are at the mercy of police attacks by the State and neo-Nazis, whose connections with the police and the army are blatant (even if the government condemned them after the assassination of a young singer).³ The self-managed centers are not an organization; they are an anti-authoritarian and pro-direct-democracy movement like the libertarian collectives that appeared during the Spanish Revolution and that were crushed by the Communists in the name of organization.

³ Pavlos Fyssas, a well-known anti-fascist hip hop artist, was murdered by a member of Golden Dawn on 18 September 2013.

The fragility of this movement is both political and economic.

Yes, the exchange relationship poses a problem. But instead of making it an abstract problem, try to resolve it this way: in Greece and Turkey there are several self-managed factories. I know of one case, a detergent factory, that was seized by the people who worked there. They produced organic cleaners very cheaply and the collectives sold them. All of the money went to those who run the factory. And so, yes, the products of a self-managed factory are commodities, but they are also part of a process that will end up superseding them. Isn't your newspaper also a commodity?

Certainly. But the “myth” of self-management is often reproached for being silent about the structural constraints that the globalized economy places upon the desire to reclaim one's own work. How are the Greek experiments stimulating from this point of view?

They are only a sketch of a movement towards self-management confronted with all the failures, all the recuperations, [of the past], but which more and more appears to be the one and only solution. Because, from the extreme left to the extreme right, no one can avoid the global financial collapse that threatens the environment and people's lives.

What roles are currently being played by the other Leftist groups, union-based or political – like Syriza,⁴ for example? Do you think that alliances are possible or that, on the contrary, one must maintain a radical separation with this fringe of the mobilization?

The centers don't allow any political intrusions. No relations with the State or with the political system that is its engine. Because it's the social [question] that predominates and solidarity operates at the base, there where the real problems of everyday life are posed. Syriza is not a solution. If it wins the upcoming elections,⁵ this will only offer a brief respite for the collectives and will perhaps allow a “purge” of the police of the numerous neo-Nazi elements within it. But the collectives want nothing to do with Syriza and all the rest. On the other hand, if Europe succeeds in maintaining the current government, the tendency that advocates fighting fascism without recourse to violence risks a reversal and the start of a civil war from which only the State and the multinationals will profit.

If we amuse ourselves and imagine a network of autonomous spaces that link Lille⁶ and its surroundings to Brussels by, say, 2043, what kind of joyous mess would it resemble?

The joyous mess that reigns in Greece, but without the permanent threat that comes from the assassins employed by the governmental order.

⁴ Also known as the Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance, Syriza was founded in 2004.

⁵ Which it in fact did on 25 May 2015.

⁶ *La Brique* is based in Lille.