

“Try to save established social rights? They are already lost”
An interview with Raoul Vaneigem¹

Q: At the beginning of the 2000s, you wrote that the words “communism,” “socialism” and “anarchism” were only “empty packages and definitively obsolete.” Yet these three words allow people to render emancipation and the end of exploitation into thinkable terms. Why replace them?

A: In 2000, it was already the case that ideology, the false character of which had been denounced by Marx, had emptied itself of the concepts, derived from proletarian consciousness and forged by the will to emancipation, that were merely banners held aloft by the protagonists of union and political bureaucracies. Power struggles very quickly supplanted the defense of the workers’ world. We know how the fight for the proletariat turned into a dictatorship exercised against it and in its name. Communism and Socialism have proved this. For the anarchism of the Spanish Revolution, there was no escape either – I’m thinking of the factions of the CNT and the FAI that were accomplices of the Généralité catalane.² Communism, Socialism and anarchism were [already] comfortably worn-out concepts when consumerism reduced their ideological covers to nothing. Political activity has become cronyism; ideas are now only items whose promotional sale is stimulated by supermarket flyers. Advertising techniques have prevailed over political terminology, entangling both Left and Right, as we know. When we see, on the one hand, the ridiculousness of elections that are monopolized by a totalitarian democracy that takes people for imbeciles, and, on the other hand, the movement of the Yellow Vests,³ which doesn’t care about ideological, religious or political labels, refuses leaders and representatives who are not mandated by the direct democracy of the assemblies, and affirms its determination to have the human way progress, we have good reason to say that if all this ideological clutter, which has caused so much blood to be spilled, is the best way to obtain established social rights that have in fact been junked – yes, decidedly, we don’t give a fuck!

¹ Raoul Vaneigem, “*Sauver les acquis sociaux ? Ils sont déjà perdus*,” published by *Revue Ballast* on 7 June 2019. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 12 August 2019. All footnotes by the translator, except where noted.

² *Publisher’s note*: In September 1936, two months after the nationalist uprising, many militants from the CNT, an anarchist labor union, entered into the government of Catalonia.

³ For Vaneigem’s take on the Yellow Vests, see “Concerning the ‘Yellow Vests’: Everything is possible, even self-managing assemblies in the middle of street intersections, villages and neighborhoods” (2018) <http://www.notbored.org/yellow-vests.pdf>.

Q: Your most recent book⁴ concludes with this movement [of the Yellow Vests]. A “delight,” an “immense uprising,” you say. What exactly fires this enthusiasm?

A: It expresses nothing more and nothing less than what I said in l'*Appel à la vie*: “This means that, since the Occupations Movement of May 1968 [in France], I’ve been seen – even in the eyes of my friends – as an incorrigible optimist, someone whose own remarks have made his own head swim. Have the kindness to think that I really don’t care about being right, when a revolt movement (not yet a revolution, far from it) strengthens the trust that I have always accorded to the word freedom, though it is so hackneyed, corrupted and substantially rotten. Why should my visceral attachment to freedom be impeded by reason and unreason, victories and defeats, hopes and disappointments, when for me it is only a matter of grabbing freedom back at every moment from the [supposed] freedoms of commerce and predation, which kill it, and of restoring to it the life that nourishes it?” I have dreamed of this moment ever since my distant adolescence. More than 50 years ago, it inspired my book *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations*.⁵ You can’t take from me the pleasure of greeting these Yellow Vests, who have hardly had any reason to read the *Treatise* in order to illustrate its poetic implementation. How can we not thank them, in the name of the humanity that they have resolved to emancipate from all barbarism?

Q: Against parliamentary democracy, you oppose direct democracy that is founded in assemblies. I inevitably think of Murray Bookchin, even if the SI described him as a “confusionist cretin.”⁶ But at least two points separate you: the majority principle and power. Bookchin claimed that only majority rule allows for democracy and that the search for consensus induces an “insidious authoritarianism.” He also claimed that abolishing power is “absurd” and

⁴ Raoul Vaneigem, *Appel à la vie contre la tyrannie étatique et marchande* (Editions Libertalia, 2019). An excerpt from it titled “Create Territories” was published by *Revue Ballast* on 6 March 2019. <http://www.notbored.org/create-territories.pdf>.

⁵ First published in French in 1967, this book has been translated into English as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.

⁶ See the letter to Bookchin from the Situationist International dated 21 December 1967: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-21December1967c.html>. For the context for this letter, see Guy Debord’s letter the English situationists dated 14 December: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-14December1967b.html>. Bookchin’s views about the SI can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJ1ZM01oroU>.

that it is only necessary to give it “a concrete institutional form of emancipation.”

A: It was a mistake to underestimate Bookchin and the importance of ecology. This wasn't my only error or the only error made by the SI. But this error had a cause. It resided in the confusion (from which the *Treatise* isn't exempt) between intellectuality and the awareness of oneself and the world, between the intelligence of the head and the sensory intelligence of the body.⁷ Recent events help clarify the notion of intellectuality. The Yellow Vests who obstinately chant “We are here, we are here!” to the State make the intellectual elites on all sides tremble – all those who, whether progressives or conservatives, take upon themselves the mission of thinking for others. What a surprise that the sectarians of Leftism and critique-critique⁸ have hastened to mock the Yellow Vests from the heights of their condescension! “Who are these boors who hit the streets? They have empty heads, no program, no thought.” Hello! These workers, peasants, small-business owners, artisans, entrepreneurs, retirees, teachers, unemployed people, workers exhausted by the search for a salaried job, underprivileged homeless people, students without schools, motorists who are taxed and tolled, attorneys, scientific researchers – in sum, all those who are simply outraged by injustice and by the arrogance of the living dead who govern us. Men and women of all ages have abruptly ceased to pack together in a sheep-like mass; they have left the bleating flocks of the silent majority. They aren't nothing people; they are people reduced to nothing and they've become aware of it. And they have a project: to instaurate the preeminence of human dignity by breaking the profit system, which is devastating life and the planet. Their terrain is lived reality, the reality of a salaried job, a small allowance, an insufficient retirement, a more and more precarious existence, in which the share of true life becomes scarce. This reality clashes with a gymnastics of financial calculations, practiced in high places. If the subtlety of these calculations escapes understanding, the final result, on the other hand, is of an exemplary and alarming simplicity: be satisfied with the charity granted to you by the public authorities (which you finance) and hurry up and die, being citizens who are respectful of the statistics that count the excessive number of old people and other links that weaken the chain of what's profitable. This gap between life and its abstract representation allows us to better understand what intellectuality is today. Far from constituting an inherent element in the nature of Humankind, it is an

⁷ For more on this theme, see the writings by Annie Le Brun: <http://www.notbored.org/Annie-Le-Brun.html>.

⁸ *Publisher's note:* In 1845, Marx and Engels published the pamphlet *The Holy Family*, which was subtitled “Critique of the Critique Critique: Against Bruno Bauer and Consorts.”

effect of its denaturation. It results from an historical phenomenon, namely the passage of a society founded on a hunter-gatherer economy to a principally agrarian system that practices the exploitation of nature and human being by human being. The appearance of City-States and the development of societies structured into dominant and dominated classes subjected the human body to the same division. The hierarchical character of the social body, composed of masters and slaves, is preserved over the centuries, in a binary fission⁹ that affects the bodies of men and women. The head – the leader – is called upon to govern the rest of the body; the Spirit, celestial and terrestrial, tames, controls and represses the vital impulses just as the priest and the prince impose their authority on the slave. The head assumes the intellectual function (the privilege of the masters), which dictates its laws to the manual function (the activity reserved for the slaves). We are still paying the price of this lost unity, this rupture that delivers the individual and physical [*charnel*] body to an endemic war with itself. No one escapes this alienation. Given that nature – reduced to a market object – has (like Woman) become a hostile, frightening and contemptible element, all of us are prey to this curse that, on its own, is capable of eradicating a re-natured evolution, a humanity that is in symbiosis with all forms of life. This is a warning to those who have had enough of the twaddle of the ideologues of ecology! In the recent past, there have been workerists dumb or twisted enough to glorify the status of the proletariat, as if it weren't stamped with an indignity from which only a classless society could allow the proletariat to emancipate itself. Who today is infatuated with the intellectual function that is one of the major reasons for existential misery and the lack of comprehension of oneself and the world? Sniffers on the lookout for power to exercise, candidates for a post as a petty bureaucratic tyrant [*chefaillon*], aspirants for the role of guru. When a movement demands a radical refusal of leaders and representatives who are not mandated by the individuals who compose a directly democratic assembly, it has no use for intellectuals who are proud of their intellectuality. Such a movement doesn't fall into the trap of the anti-intellectualism professed by the intellectuals of fascist populism ("When I hear the word 'culture,' I reach for my revolver"¹⁰ only reflects the intellectual prejudices of obscurantism and militant ignorance, which are so popular with religious fundamentalists and neo-Nazis). It isn't denunciations of scheming leaders in the self-managing assemblies that we need; we need preeminence accorded to solidarity, to the human sense, to the awareness of our potential strength and our

⁹ *Publisher's note*: multiplication by division.

¹⁰ *Publisher's note*: The phrase originally comes from Hanns Johst's 1933 play *Schlageter* (Act I, Scene 1) and has subsequently and regularly been attributed to the Nazi executives Goebbels and Göring.

creative imagination. It is certainly the case that the careful implementation of a larger project will be groping and confused in nature, but at least it is already the expression of a healthy and calm anger that proclaims: no one will give me orders, no one will bark at me! As for the question of the majority and the minority, I've explained this subject more than once. For me, the voting in a self-managing assembly cannot be reduced to the quantitative, to the mechanical. The law of numbers accords poorly with the quality of the choice. Why must a minority bow down before a majority? Doesn't this fall back into the old duality of strength and weakness? There are situations in which the urgency requires avoiding endless discussions and prevarications, but, even if it is a question of deciding upon an insignificant trifle, dialogue, palavering, conciliation, the harmonization of points of view – otherwise known as the surpassing of contraries – are undeniably preferable to the power relations implied by the dictatorship of numbers. Let's try to not have to "work during the emergency." *A fortiori*, I believe that, even if it were adopted by a large majority, an inhuman decision – a punishment, a penalty of death, for example – would be unacceptable. It isn't men who should be placed out of harm's way; it is a system, it is machines devoted to exploitation and profit. The human sense of a single person will always prevail over the barbarism of many.

Q: You write that someone who identifies himself with a territory or a language divests herself from his vitality and humanity. But isn't being without a soil or a maternal tongue the destiny of robots?

A: It is curious to have to choose between belonging to a geographical entity and wandering like an exile. For me, my homeland is the Earth. Identifying myself with the-human-being-in-the-making – which is what I try to be – keeps me from tipping over into nationalism, regionalism, or any ethnic, religious or ideological communitarianism, from succumbing to archaic and morbid prejudices that perpetuate the traditional robotization of behavior. You mention the mafia internationalism of globalization. I'm betting on an international of the human race and I can see the pertinence of a peaceful insurrection that will make it happen.

Q: You call on people to stop collaborating with the State, which is the servant "of the banks and the multinational corporations." To be clear: to stop paying taxes. Many anti-capitalists continue to think that what Bourdieu has called

the State’s “left hand”¹¹ – the public services, for example – is still worth saving. Must we chop off both hands without hesitation?

A: Try to save the established social rights? They are already lost. Trains, schools, hospitals, and retirement homes are pushed into the junkyard by the State’s *bulldozer*.¹² The liquidation continues. The profit machine, of which the State is only a banal cog, will not go backwards. Its ideal conditions would be maintaining an atmosphere of civil war, frightening minds and profiting from the chaos. The State’s hands don’t only manipulate money, the truncheon and the lie. How can we not place our trust in the hands of the people who, in the traffic circles, the civic centers [*les maisons du peuple*] and the directly democratic assemblies, are busy reconstructing the commonweal?

Q: You are said to favor a “monthly allowance,” which others call a basic or universal income. But how can this be instituted without the State?

A: The principle of giving everyone enough to keep them from falling below the poverty line appears to have a good intention. [But] the obvious caused me to abandon it. There were illusions about the intelligence that, at the time, hadn’t left the heads of the government. Someone named Tobin had proposed that the financial bubble, threatened with apoplexy, be given a salutary puncture of 0.001% that could avoid financial implosion and be used to fund the preservation of established social rights. The accelerated idiocy of the governmental “elites” now excludes a measure that even the last remnants of Socialism didn’t dare adopt. The State is now no more than a Leviathan that has been reduced to the role of a gendarme in the Grand Guignol. Everything re-roots itself at the base. It is here that we can learn to protect ourselves against the consequences of the governmental lie [*la grande Baliverne étatique*] and the plan to involve us in its collapse. When so many sociologists, political commentators and philosophical nullities come out of their holes, won’t the boat sink? Everything must be rebuilt, if not reinvented: education, the various therapies and sciences, culture, energy, permaculture, and transportation. Just as long as the debates, palavering and reflections are situated on that terrain, and not in the ethereal spheres of economic, ideological or intellectual speculation! Isn’t it up to us the reinvent a currency of exchange and a solidarity bank that, preparing for the disappearance of money, allows each person to be assured of a living wage?

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2003), a French philosopher, made this distinction in an interview published in *Le Monde* on 14 January 1992.

¹² English in original.

Q: You foreground Zapatista Chiapas and communalist Rojava. Both experiments are in part founded on an army: the EZLN and the YPG-J, respectively. Your call to “create territories”¹³ that have been freed from political power and the global market – how does it understand the question of self-defense, since, sooner or later, the State will send in its cops or its army?

A: It is clear that each situation presents a specificity that demands an appropriate treatment. Notre-Dames-des-Landes is not Rojava. The EZLN is not a product to be exported. Each territory in the process of liberation will have its own forms of struggle. The decisions will be taken by those who are there on the ground. Nevertheless, it is good to recall that the manner of understanding beings and things varies according to the perspective adopted. The orientation given to the struggle exercises a considerable influence on its nature and consequences. Your behavior is completely different if you are fighting militarily against barbarism with the weapons of barbarism or if you oppose as an accomplished fact the irrepressible right to life, which sometimes regresses but is never defeated and always begins again. The first option is that of the guerrilla. Paramilitary Leftism has demonstrated by its defeats that, if you enter the terrain of the enemy, you yield to his strategy and submit to his law. The victories in allegedly emancipatory confrontations are even worse. The insurrectionary power turns its guns against those who have allowed it to triumph. In *L'État n'est plus rien, soyons tout*,¹⁴ I advanced the slogan, “Neither soldiers nor martyrs.” It didn't provide any answers; it only posed the question: how to make the will to live and its human awareness [*conscience*] a weapon that does not kill, an absolute weapon? Wouldn't the energy that the militant rioters [*casseurs*] waste setting fire to trashcans and breaking shop windows be used more judiciously in the defense of the ZADs¹⁵ fighting against the implantation of harmful environmental effects and profitable uselessness? A similar line of questioning applies to the demonstrators who occasionally display the illusion of obtaining measures that favor the climate. What can we expect of the States that are the traveling salesmen of the polluting economy? The massive presence of protestors would be better placed where this economy has poisoned an entire region, a whole territory. Doesn't the encounter between blind violence and

¹³ Raoul Vaneigem, “Create Territories,” an excerpt from *Appel à la vie contre la tyrannie étatique et marchande* (2019): <http://www.notbored.org/create-territories.pdf>.

¹⁴ Raoul Vaneigem, *L'État n'est plus rien, soyons tout* (Rue des cascades, 2010), not yet translated into English.

¹⁵ *zone à défendre* (a zone to be defended).

a will that is peaceful but resolved have some chance of creating an insurrectionary pacifism who obstinacy would little by little break the yoke of the State of profit?

Q: You mention the “rioters” [“*casseurs*”]. And more than once you have in fact advanced the idea that the “damage” [“*casse*”] doesn’t serve emancipation but “restores” order. The uprising of the Yellow Vests has transformed many “nonviolent” people into sympathizers with the *Black Blocs*.¹⁶ Only “damage,” they are essentially saying, has made power react; only fire has made Macron tremble. Is this false?

A: The beautiful victory that has made a technocrat with the brains of a cash register tremble! The State has ceded nothing; it can’t do it, it doesn’t want to do it. Its only reaction has been to overestimate the violence, to use physical and mediatic bludgeoning to divert attention from the real hooligans [*des véritables casseurs*], those who ruin the public good. As I have said, the breaking of shop windows, which is so dear to journalists, is the expression of a blind anger. The anger is justified, but not the blindness! The waltz with a thousand beats¹⁷ of paving stones and teargas goes on and on, not getting anywhere. Governmental authorities are compensated for their time. What will prevail is the development of human consciousness, the increasingly firm resolution, despite the weariness and doubts that are counted up by fear and mediatic cowardice. The power of this determination will not cease to grow because it doesn’t care about victory or defeat. And that’s because, without leaders and co-opting representatives, it is there and it assumes on its own and for all of us the freedom to accede to an authentic life. Be assured of it: democracy is in the streets, not in the ballot boxes.

Q: In 2003, in *Le Chevalier, la Dame, le Diable et la mort*,¹⁸ you devote some wonderful pages to the animal question. It has since then become a daily feature of “public debate.” Recently you spoke of a “new civilization” to be created. Can it turn the page on the daily massacre of animals on which our societies are built?

A: The devastated biotopes, the pesticides, the massacres of bees, birds, insects, marine fauna suffocated by the deluge of plastic, the concentrated breeding of animals, the poisoning of the earth, the air, the water – so many crimes perpetrated

¹⁶ English in original.

¹⁷ A reference to “*La valse à mille temps*,” a song by Jacques Brel (1959).

¹⁸ Raoul Vaneigem, *Le Chevalier, la Dame, le Diable et la mort* (Le Cherche midi, 2003), not yet translated into English.

with impunity by the economy, in complete prefabricated legality. To the indignant people who proclaim, “We must save humanity from disaster,” the cadavers who govern us oppose the spectacle of untenable promises. They cynically reiterate the irrevocable character of their decree: we must save the economy, profitability and money; for this noble ideal, we must pay the price of misery and blood. Their world is not ours. They know it; they don’t care. It is up to us to decide upon our lives and our environment. It is up to us to mock their bureaucratic, juridical and police-related constraints by breaking their hold at the base, there where we are, there where it suffocates us. As the sans-culottes of 1789 said, “You laugh at us? You won’t be laughing for long!” We are headed towards a style of life that is founded on a new alliance with the natural world. It is in such a perspective that the fate of the animals will be approached, not in a charitable or compassionate spirit, but in terms of rehabilitation: that of the animalism that constitutes us and that we exploit, torture, and repress in the same way that we mistreat, repress and mistreat¹⁹ our “inferior” brothers, who are also our *interior* brothers.

Q: You often speak of “the preeminence of the human.” How can we take on the singularity of *Homo sapiens* and yet recall to him, in the Anthropocene era, that he needs to tone it down, because he only represents 0.01 percent of the biomass?

A: It is high time that the *Ya Basta!*²⁰ – we are sick of it, enough! – is applied to the dogma fabricated by a system of exploitation that, by favoring the masters, propagates the belief in the debility and weaknesses native to the human being as a whole. It doesn’t stop knocking this poor wretch down. For a long time, it was only an excretion of the gods, crushed according to their whims. It has been saddled with an ontological curse, a natural deformation, a state of permanent puerility, which necessitates the tutelage of a master. Today it has ended up in a bin, where it is reduced to an object, a number, a statistic, a market value. Everything except the recognition in it of a creativity, a potential richness, a subjectivity that aspires to express itself freely. They continue to preach the anguish of the infinite spaces of the Jansenist Pascal,²¹ while a revolution of everyday life privileges the individual and initiates her into a solidarity that is capable of freeing her from egotistic calculations and the individualism in which the herd-mentality society keeps her imprisoned. While men and women are laying the basis for an egalitarian and

¹⁹ This repetition of mistreat [*maltraitons*] is in the French original.

²⁰ Spanish for “Enough is Enough!” Adopted by the Zapatistas circa 1994.

²¹ Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), a mathematician and physicist, wrote a defense of Jansenism, which emphasized original sin, human fallibility and the necessity of divine grace.

fraternal society, the sermon that the propagandists of voluntary servitude repeat tirelessly still finds megaphones! The only infinite spaces that impassion me are those that are opened before us by the immensity of a life to be discovered and created. In the past we cried out, “to the kennel with the yapping dogs of kings and priests!” They are the same today, only reconverted. To the kennel with the yapping dogs of the market!