

“Gérard Berréby: Publishing and Sediton”

An Interview with *Causeur*¹

***Causeur*: you have just co-written and published *Rien n’est fini, tout commence* (Allia),² a book of interviews with the Belgian situationist Raoul Vaneigem, whose *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations*, published towards the end of 1967,³ had a considerable impact on the barricades of May 68. Through this collaboration, did you want to create an exhaustive biography or provide an addendum for “Generation Y”?**

Gérard Berréby: my dialogues with Raoul Vaneigem are a confrontation between two individuals from different generations who have experienced the same era at different ages – during May 68, I was barely out of adolescence, while Raoul Vaneigem was a man more than 30 years old with a solid background and training. With *Rien n’est fini, tout commence*, I wanted to retrace how things began and developed, in other words, to understand the social and intellectual protagonists of this movement. A world that, in fact, has little to do with that of today. The people classified as “Generation Y”⁴ sometimes are stunned by it! Through a back-and-forth between the past and our contemporary world, I wanted to produce a “period piece,” an oral history, so to speak, that restored the cultural, social and political climate of several decades of the Twentieth Century.

Reading this “period piece,” we discover several colorful details concerning the Situationist International (1957-1972). For example, even among these revolutionaries, the only woman in the group⁵ served the food and did the dishes. Perhaps this type of anecdote says more about the minds of that generation than many university studies.

¹ *Gérard Berréby, édition et sédition*, interview conducted by Daoud Boughezala and Marc Cohen, published by *Causeur* on 6 December 2014:

<https://www.causeur.fr/gerard-berreby-edition-et-sedition-30493>. Translated into English by NOT BORED! on 1 April 2021. All footnotes by the translator.

² Published in 2014. Translated into English by Bill Brown as *Raoul Vaneigem: Caricatures and Self-Portraits of the Situationist International* (Colossal Books, 2015).

³ Translated into English by various translators as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.

⁴ Sometimes called “millennials.”

⁵ There was only one woman in the group *at that time* (circa 1962-65): Michèle Bernstein. But she certainly did a lot more than domestic chores. A former lettrist and a co-founder of the SI, she wrote for the group’s journal, wrote commercial texts on the side that made the cash-poor group the money that it desperately needed and created real works of art (mostly paintings). Furthermore, there were in fact several female members of the SI over the course of its 15-year-long existence, the painter Jacqueline de Jong, among them.

The form of this conversation allowed me to approach all aspects of the subject, without presenting a great, big, boring academic thesis that no one would read. To put the readers into the swing of things, I begin these interviews with 50 pages on Belgium, Vaneigem's childhood during World War II, then his youth, his first girlfriends, etc. For example, telling about the circumstances of his meeting Guy Debord might appear anecdotal, but this isn't the case at all. In this story, we rediscover their shared intellectual influences, notably the role played by the philosopher Henri Lefebvre.

Your interest in the situationists goes back a long way. A big part of the Allia catalogue gravitates around the “situ universe,” in the widest sense of the word. Beyond the generational effect, what reasons did you have to dedicate so many hours of work to an avant-garde that some believe is obsolete?

I wanted to build a catalogue that had an identity and a meaning. *Rien n'est fini* is actually the fourth book of interviews that I have dedicated to this subject. At the risk of seeming like a veteran, the first work that I published about the subject goes back to 1985. Imagine! That was a century ago. It was a mass of archives titled *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'Internationale situationniste*.⁶ In it you can already see my approach and my method of working: showing how, in a given era, it is possible to do something and the repercussions of this act on other people. Looking back, we can see that such actions are no longer possible. And so, in *La Tribu* (Allia, 1998),⁷ which I co-wrote with Jean-Michel Mension, I describe how young people got together, produced a little mimeographed bulletin that cost just over three francs,⁸ and spent their lives in the cafés. Given the current [high] prices for a cup of coffee or a short beer, many readers will wonder how it was possible for them to change the world by drinking all day!

This isn't the only thing that our era doesn't understand about the one that preceded it. Regarding May 68, from Daniel Cohn-Bendit to Zemmour,⁹ today's authoritative social interpretation of the student movement believes that young people rose up to prepare the ground for liberal-libertarian capitalism!

⁶ Collected and published by Berréby himself, this collection was excoriated by Guy Debord in a letter to Floriana Lebovici dated 3 August 1985: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-3August1985.html>. Berréby's book bears “a pretentiously erroneous title. It is really a matter of ‘COBRA’ and lettrist sources [...] Naturally, I wish the greatest lack of success to the people who claim to treat the ‘foundation’ of the SI in [such] a publicity-minded fashion, whereas the majority of the texts and people evoked had at the time no relation to this event, not even *against* it. One could say that the Mormons, who today baptize the souls of the past, have been replaced by a computer.”

⁷ Translated as *The Tribe* by Donald Nicholson-Smith and published by City Lights Books in 2001.

⁸ Produced by the Lettrist International, this bulletin was originally called *Internationale Lettriste* (1952-1953) and then *Potlatch* (1954-1957).

⁹ Daniel Cohn-Bendit (born 1946) was a famous student radical during the spring and summer of 1968. He has published several books since then, including a book of interviews titled *Forget 68* (éditions de l'Aube, 2008). Eric Zemmour (born 1958) is a far-right author who has written several books, including *Le Suicide français*, which was published by Albin Michel in 2014.

Some claim that the disaster of our contemporary society derives from the utopia of 68. Some do it crudely, like Zemmour; others do it in a more subtle and literary manner, like Houellebecq.¹⁰ Those critiques of 68 are too hasty. They dodge an essential point: if the ideas of that era were recuperated by commodification to the point that they became an essential element of the spectacle, they were in fact hijacked. Let's take the example of the feminist aspirations of the 1960s. Though women's rights are developing, the image of women has never been so commercialized and in a spectacular manner: on any Internet site, you see a *pin-up*¹¹ on the right side. But must we throw the baby out with the bath water? Of course not. In 1968, society was fossilized and didn't correspond to the aspirations of a fringe of the youth. The fact that a critical aspiration was subverted isn't a good reason to prevent living forces from developing ideas and criticizing the institutions of their era; otherwise nothing would get done.

We can see that the situationists left themselves wide open to criticism. From its first years, the SI increased the number of exclusions in the name of doctrinal purity.¹¹ Under the authority of Debord, Raoul Vaneigem went from being the executor to the victim of such purges.¹² How do you explain the fact that a group that was always distinguished from Leftism by its alleged refusal of ideology pushed paranoia to the point of self-destruction?

We emphasize this shift in our book. With Vaneigem, we conclude that “the worm was in the fruit,” since an association of free and autonomous individuals struggling against a separated world ended up instituting hierarchical and precisely separated internal relations. It isn't for nothing that we compare the SI's practices to those of the sects in Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*¹³ or that, for me, they evoke Dostoïevski's *The Possessed*. Paradoxically, it was at its apex, around 1967-1968, at the time of the publication of *De la misère en milieu étudiant*, *La Société du spectacle* and the *Traité de savoir-vivre*,¹⁴ that the decline of the situationist movement began.¹⁵

All things considered, aren't the true gravediggers of May 68 those who talk indiscriminate nonsense about the “society of the spectacle”? Debord's ashes must be spinning in the stratosphere as a result of all the tributes paid to him by the State and the newspapers that he detested.

¹⁰ Michel Thomas, aka Michel Houellebecq (born 1956) is a writer, poet and essayist.

¹¹ In point of fact, people were most often excluded from the SI for their *actions*, or lack thereof, and not for their ideas or lack of “doctrinal purity.”

¹² In point of fact, there were no “purges” within the SI and Debord himself initiated or insisted on only a few of the exclusions that were carried out by the SI during its existence.

¹³ For the relevance of Cohn's book to Vaneigem, see the ex-situationist's *Resistance to Christianity* (1993): <http://www.notbored.org/resistance.html>.

¹⁴ Written by Mustapha Khayati, *On the Poverty of Student Life* was in fact published in 1966. As for the other two books – Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* – they were published in 1967.

¹⁵ For his part, Vaneigem sets the beginning of the decline in 1963.

That's the least one could say. But it's a natural movement of history.¹⁶ All innovative thought, progressive or subversive, that has meaning at a given moment is doomed [*vouée*] to recuperation. By contesting the state of affairs of society and its organization, situationist thought showed itself to be anticipatory, which explains its massive diffusion at the end of the 1960s and especially during the 1970s. Over time, power became concerned with neutralizing it: today there isn't a single politician – political party makes no difference – who doesn't refer to the notions of spectacle, alienation, or everyday life. The official consecration of Debord as a “national treasure”¹⁷ is nothing more nor less than a form of mummification. Reducing him to a great writer – which he was, without a doubt – just like Chateaubriand or Cardinal de Retz allows the emptying out of his critical substance.

Was the publication of [Debord's] *Œuvres complètes* by Gallimard (2006) part of this recuperative movement? What do you think of this volume?

This collection is like an intellectual swindle. On the strictly philological level, it is a partial edition that orients its meaning before its texts are even read. Behind this book there is a will to construct a myth. Those people added tendentious annotations, which are an indirect way of settling scores, and they have forgotten about certain publishing houses established around Debord or the situationist movement, including mine, as it turns out, as well as other texts that could have provided another view in the perception of his work. In brief, this work is neither rigorous, honest, nor acceptable; it must be completely redone. And then there is an incomplete manifesto, an accessible unpublished text, which is not part of this publication. . . . If there are editors who would agree to publish texts in such conditions, what would you have me do about it? I am not a masked vigilante! It would be necessary to wait a long time until this piece of property falls into the public domain for one to rebuild everything from the ground up, that is, if readers are still interested in these texts 50 years from now.

Meanwhile, today's readers are devouring Eric Zemmour's *Le Suicide français*. Despite your divergent views, you seem to share some of his observations in your discussions with Vaneigem. For example, when you cite the pillaging of the RER in Grigny on 16 March 2013¹⁸ as an example of the “war of all against all” that undermines our society.

You cannot wipe out with the stroke of a pen, as all of the established editorial writers do, a work that has sold several hundred thousand copies. If you are even slightly intellectually honest, you must make a certain number of observations. Just yesterday, near where I live, in Goutte d'Or, an Indian restaurant was vandalized by, it would seem, a gang of Sri Lankan mobsters due to a disagreement concerning around 150 Euros. A video of the attack was played by the website of

¹⁶ For the situationists, recuperation is one of the central defense mechanisms of *modern capitalism*.

¹⁷ Cf. the Bibliothèque nationale de France, circa January 2009, referring to Debord's archives, which the BnF had recently acquired.

¹⁸ The *Réseau express régional* (RER) is a high-speed, regional train service. As for the events at Grigny, they were mentioned by Berréby during his interview with Vaneigem, but the ex-situationist did not take up the subject. Instead, like many of the things Berréby said to him, he flat-out ignored it.

the *Parisien*; the images are very violent. These kinds of actions and their staging [in the media] create a generalized feeling of fear in society, everyone is suspicious of everyone else, of the guy in the subway who wants to talk to you, and you feel assaulted. That's the war of all against all. In the attack on the high-speed train at Grigny, what did the robbers get? Nine cell phones and about 150 or 200 Euros, thus making the pockets of the travelers as poor as them. And these delinquents were pretty stupid: with surveillance cameras everywhere, they were soon rounded up! And then the entirety of these manifestations is then used for electoral ends by manipulating words and images.

The Grigny suspects convicted of racketeering got off with light sentences, but let's move on. What do you think of the link established by Zemmour between insecurity and immigration?

It is enough to view court records to see that 75% of the people caught red-handed originally come from the Maghreb or Black Africa. Any judge will confirm this for you, it is a statistical fact! From these facts you can draw hasty conclusions without trying to understand why that number of delinquents find themselves behind bars. It is reductive and demagogical to deduce from this that we must deport them all, to stigmatize them or lock them up. Above all, that would omit France's colonial past and the living conditions that were and are still imposed on them. And the nation-state is an obsolete idea. And so, everything must be rethought.

Despite the extenuating circumstances that you attribute to immigrant delinquency, you share a part of Zemmour's diagnosis. This is enough to condemn you to the pillory!

Whatever the dominant way of thinking says, it isn't because you recognize a reality that Eric Zemmour recognizes that you have to have the same analysis. But to have a clear conscience, we prohibit ourselves from speaking of things in an objective manner, out of fear of playing into the hands of some enemy! Being a naturalized French citizen originally from Tunisia, I know what it is like to be a foreigner. But with respect to the jurisdiction over foreigners living in France, I've said in private conversation that the inter-African jurisdiction over immigration is much more severe than the French jurisdiction over it. People say to me, "that is a Lepenist argument."¹⁹ My retort is, "So what?" The danger precisely consists in keeping quiet about things. There shouldn't be any taboo topic. Political correctness, even if this expression is a little comic, wins success for those who claim to combat it.

Through one of your authors, Michel Bounan, you've had problems with witch hunters. Twenty-five years later, if you could do things over, would you still publish *Le Temps du sida* (Allia, 1990), an essay that fascinated Guy Debord but that some gay activists and *mainstream*²⁰ Leftist critics described as homophobic?²¹

¹⁹ A reference to Jean-Marie Le Pen (born 1928), a far-right French politician.

²⁰ English in original.

²¹ For Bounan's response to these charges, see his *Incitation à l'autodéfense* (1995), translated into English by NOT BORED! as *Incitement to Self-Defense*:

<http://www.notbored.org/incitement.html>.

Yes, I obviously would! And not only because, as you said, this book fascinated Debord. When I published it, the newspaper writers who spoke of it, with the notable exception of Michèle Bernstein, writing in the pages of *Libération*, either vilified its author as an anti-queer charlatan who proposed homeopathic remedies in the fight against AIDS or, at best, presented him as a passably enlightened mystic. All this resulted from very confused reading, because there's absolutely nothing like that in the book itself. In it, Michel Bounan explained the role of co-factors in the development of AIDS, that is to say, the development of industrial agriculture, the effects of pollution on the general weakening of the immune systems of individuals, etc. All that was a synthesis of the results of research into AIDS that Bounan had read in the medical press, before he put them into perspective. If the critics denigrated *Le Temps du sida*, it was because they feared his thesis. They didn't want to speak of it any further. Today, these analyses are taken up by a few medical currents, but still very timidly.

Was it under the influence of Bounan that, in *Rien n'est fini*, you developed a quite catastrophic critical discourse, while Vaneigem demonstrated a certain optimism in his enthusiasm for the *Indignados*?²²

I am under the influence of all the books that I've published. It is true that I have passably apocalyptic attitudes about contemporary society, that is to say, about the state of the world on the ecological level, about the introduction of digital technology into everything, about wars that spring up virtually everywhere and about the end of market civilization. To Raoul Vaneigem, who makes a quite solemn declaration in support of the Greek and Spanish self-managing movements, I say that there are only individual solutions. This is a debate that takes place among the inheritors of the radical thoughts and movements of May 68. Forty-five years ago, people thought in a collective manner, that is to say, that the search for a solution to the problems that we all face were always collective. But, at the current moment, if we do not want to end up swallowed by the first virus that comes along, it is necessary to save oneself.

You make a clear distinction between your ideas and the communitarian way of life of the Tarnac group and the other "ZADists."²³ What do you think of the so-called Invisible Committee's appeals to insurrection? Even in their revolutionary incantations, it seems they mimic their elders.

Our contemporaries do in fact have the tendency to mimic preceding generations, because all these protest movements must produce their own autonomous way of thinking that allows them to grasp the ensemble of the problems they face. I observe these movements, which are often more and more radical and more and more violent, that emerge, develop and disappear, but we

²² A widespread Spanish protest movement that began on 15 May 2011. For Vaneigem's comments on it, see pages 159-160 of *Caricatures and Self-Portraits*: <http://www.notbored.org/caricatures.pdf>

²³ "ZAD" stands for *Zone à Défendre* (zone to be defended). Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, "Solidarity with ND des Landes" (2018): <http://www.notbored.org/ZAD.pdf>.

very rarely see networks aggregate around them.²⁴ This won't come about by adding to their rhetoric.

It is, no doubt, to not lose the attention of young readers that you've added an impressive collection of notes to *Rien n'est fini*. In such a high-end book, this shows that, following Bertolt Brecht, you have truly decided to not leave anyone behind!

There was a time when you could publish books with citations in Greek and Latin, and it went very well. Today, when there is a citation in Latin in a book that I am publishing, I add a footnote that provides a translation because, beyond 15 emancipated readers, no one else understands. When there is a citation in English at the start of a chapter, we can show off, I get it translated [into French]. I take care of the reader, who need not have to struggle to turn the pages. Publishing books for a small coterie doesn't interest me. And publishing books means you have to know something about your era.

In your editorial approach, as in the life and work of Vaneigem, we can perceive a dimension that, all in all, is humanist.

Yes. To say it much more simply: if you don't love your neighbor, I don't see the interest of taking the effort to create a work! There is no creation without the notion of giving.

If there was still a need to do so, this altruism of yours shows that you have clearly broken with what one could call "editorial leftism": the egotistic refusal to communicate, the taste for gratuitous provocation, botched jobs, etc.

There are forms of behavior that correspond to their era. Vaneigem doesn't want to appear as the last situationist hussar or be regarded as an object of curiosity, and so he refuses to speak in the mass media,²⁵ something that I understand very well. But I don't take the same position. I believe that the break with the media made sense in the 1960s. But now we are not facing the same issues or the same social structures. Radical changes have taken place since then. There's now a kind of interchangeability between one form of media and another. I use the vectors of information useful to our public: éditions Allia even has a page on Facebook. We will not remain glued to the past!

Despite everything, you live in a certain way against your era, if only because of the extreme care that you take in publishing books with irreproachable typography, syntax and spelling. All things considered, does your radicalism involve a certain kind of classicism?

²⁴ In point of fact, the arrests and prosecution of the Tarnac group triggered the creation of support networks all over Europe and in the United States. Cf.

<http://www.notbored.org/tarnac.html>

²⁵ Since this interview was published, Vaneigem has given many interviews with mainstream journals and newspapers, including *Le Monde*: <http://www.notbored.org/RV-le-monde.pdf>.

What do you want me to say? It's because we work like dogs. Flaubert spoke of the "conservative who conserves nothing."²⁶ For my part, I've become conservative to the extent that I must conserve the heritage of the [French] language and perpetuate it. In itself, this is already a critique of other books that are being published.

And *wham* for your colleagues!

I don't give lessons to anyone. When you've put out a book, you love what you have done, that's all. If I'd wanted to laze around and make lots of money, I would have done something else. I'm not making any moral judgments here. It's OK to laze around. But I love the things made, such as the book that you have in your hands right now. Keeping in mind all our constraints (paying the rent, taxes, suppliers . . .), I challenge you to find a publishing house that is freer than ours.

²⁶ A Google search for Flaubert and the phrase *conservateur qui ne conserve rien* only brings up two links: this very interview with Gérard Berréby and an essay by Michel Adam titled "Flaubert et la bêtise": https://www.persee.fr/doc/bude_0004-5527_1972_num_1_2_3185.