

# The Elementary Roots of Raoul Vaneigem: “Humanity Dies So That An Economy in Which Mad Money Goes Round and Round Can Survive”<sup>1</sup>

*What kind of environment did you grow up in? Did your childhood prepare the way for the rest of your journey?*

My childhood took place in Lessines, a small working-class town [in Belgium].<sup>2</sup> The rock quarries defined the slums in which I lived, as opposed to the nice places, which were principally occupied by the bourgeoisie. At the time, class consciousness was, you might say, punctuated by the sirens that at specific times signaled the beginning and the end of work, pauses and accidents. My father, a railroad worker, regretted not being able to pursue university studies due to a lack of financial resources. He dreamed of a better fate for me, but not without warning me about those who became “traitors to their class” by climbing the social ladder. I owe to him the reservations that I had early on about the roles of the intellectual – guide, tribune, master thinker. The repugnance that is felt today concerning the deterioration of the so-called “elites” confirms the soundness of my reluctance. In *La liberté enfin s’éveille au souffle de la vie*,<sup>3</sup> I show how and why the rulers are becoming increasingly stupid. Anyone who takes a step back from the harassment of media lies can easily verify the following: intellectual intelligence decreases with an increase in power, and sensible intelligence progresses in the presence of what is truly human. I have always accorded pride of place to the pleasures of knowledge, exploration, and the dissemination of acquired knowledge. I see curiosity – along with love, creation and solidarity – as the passionate attractions that are the most vital to the construction of the human being. But this is precisely what continues to be suffocated by a system that shamelessly calls “education” the “get out of my way” mindset in which the competitive market gathers up its slaves.

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<sup>1</sup> *Les Racines élémentaires de Raoul Vaneigem: «L’humanité meurt pour que survive une économie où l’argent fou tourne en rond»*, an interview with Raoul Vaneigem, conducted by Béatrice Delvaux and Catherine Maker, published on 14 November 2020 by *Le Soir*, a Belgian newspaper: <https://plus.lesoir.be/337642/article/2020-11-14/les-racines-elementaires-de-raoul-vaneigem-lhumanite-meurt-pour-que-survive-une>. In the caption to an accompanying photo of Vaneigem (reproduced at the end of this text), Samuel Aranda (the photographer) says, “It was at his retreat, near Barcelona, that Raoul Vaneigem began a conscientious and cordial exchange with us. A self-proclaimed Epicurean, this intellectual polished his thought under the Catalan sun.” Translated from the French by NOT BORED! on 21 November 2020. All footnotes by the translator, except where noted.

<sup>2</sup> For more about Vaneigem’s childhood, see *Rien n’est fini, tout commence* (Editions Allia, 2014), translated by NOT BORED! as *Self-Portraits and Caricatures of the Situationist International* (Colossal Books, 2015): <http://www.notbored.org/caricatures.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *La liberté enfin s’éveille au souffle de la vie*, published by Le Cherche Midi (2020), not yet translated into English.

I am not an expert in anything.<sup>4</sup> My *Mouvement du libre esprit*<sup>5</sup> responds to the desire to examine more closely the Middle Ages, to which historians somewhat hastily attribute a general adhesion to the Christian faith. My *Résistance au christianisme*<sup>6</sup> responds to the playful preoccupation that, to me, has always rejoiced in being “untouched by God,” according to Prévert’s beautiful formulation.<sup>7</sup> The best critique of this amiably subversive pastime has come from the “Yellow Vests,”<sup>8</sup> who rightly believe that existential and social struggles outweigh such trifles as religious, political and philosophical opinions.

*You are also an inspiration for generations of people seeking another society. How and when did you start down this path? Where does your radical perspective come from?*

Without idealizing a childhood in a rather festive family environment (“it isn’t because you are poor that you must live poorly,” my father used to say), I have had the paradoxical impression that kind affection, which spared me so much torment (except for the omnipresent feeling of guilt), also put me into direct contact with the cruel conditions that overwhelmed the men, women, children and animals around me. So well, in fact, that anger concerning injustice and barbarity took the place of the revolts against parental authority that intensify during adolescence. My father never tried to shut me up by invoking his power or showing a lack of respect when I called him a “Social Democrat” in our stormy political discussions.

*What encounters have been decisive in your life? And why?*

No doubt those that, landing on fertile ground, responded to an existential need, to a gap that had to be filled. In no particular order: Zola’s *Germinal*, Zweig’s *Le combat avec le démon*, Nietzsche, Marx, Hölderlin, Shelley, Nerval, Jarry, Artaud, and Surrealism. Later on: Voline, Coeurderoy, Ciliga, Ida Mett, Victor Serge, Montaigne, and Jan Valtin. And finally: Fourier.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> According to the French version of Wikipedia, Vaneigem is a “Médiéviste” and “spécialiste des hérésies.” He has in fact written three books on the latter subject: *Les Hérésies* (PUF, collection “Que sais-je,” 1994), plus the two other books he mentions.

<sup>5</sup> *Mouvement du libre esprit: généralités et témoignages sur les affleurements de la vie à la surface du Moyen Âge, de la Renaissance et, incidemment, de notre époque* (Ramsay, 1986). Translated by Randall Cherry and Ian Patterson as *Movement of the Free Spirit: General Considerations and Firsthand Testimony Concerning Some Brief Flowerings of Life in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and, Incidentally, Our Own Time* (Zone Books, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> *Résistance au christianisme: Les heresies des orgines au XVIIIe siècle* (Fayard, 1993). Translated by NOT BORED! as *Resistance to Christianity: A Chronological Encyclopedia of Heresy from the Beginning to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*: <http://www.notbored.org/resistance.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Prévert was a French poet (1900-1977). “J’ai toujours été intact de Dieu” is the title of one of his poems.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, “Tout est possible, même les assemblées d’autogestion,” translated by NOT BORED! as “Concerning the ‘Yellow Vests’: Everything is Possible, Even Self-managing Assemblies” (2018): <http://www.notbored.org/yellow-vests.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Notably absent here is Sade, who once featured prominently in Vaneigem’s work. See for example this remark in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967): “It is high time that revolutionaries read Sade with the same care that they read Marx.”

*Who were the fellow travelers whose perspectives have been valuable to you? How about Siné,<sup>10</sup> who in his own way shared your commitments for a long time?*

Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, Attila Kotányi, and Mustapha Khayati. I didn't know Siné very well, but I appreciated his intransigent battle against the idiot-making machine (so well oiled by Nazism and Stalinism), which is now running at full speed.

*Can you give examples of people who you think everyone could be inspired by? For example: Subcommandante Marcos (now Galeano), who was a spokesperson (and not a leader) of the Zapatista movement? Or Noam Chomsky, who shares with you the dual career of politically engaged intellectual? Or Greta Thunberg, who, at the local level, rebelled against the destruction of our ecosystems?*

There are no valuable lessons to be drawn from people if they haven't at first abolished the cult of personality. The Zapatistas never failed to remind people that they weren't a model, but an experiment. I have never read Chomsky's writings. I don't know which green-dollar capitalist manipulations Greta Thunberg has been exposed to, but the various insults hurled at adolescents who want to save the earth and free it from the grasp of profit-making has revealed the extent to which spinelessness has affected those who pride themselves on being intellectuals and even – this is the height of ridiculousness – philosophers. For the most part, sociologists dwell on official assessments while disdaining the poetry around them that aspires to change the world. Dear young Marx, you who wrote “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, it is now a question of transforming it!” I feel I'm in better company with the insurgents of everyday life who, confused though they may be, agitate for change all over the world. Among them a new way of thinking is awakening. It will imprint its radical novelty on people's mindsets and customs as long as it keeps to its fundamental principles: no leaders, no self-proclaimed representatives, no political or labor-union machines; self-organization and absolute priority given to humanity and solidarity.

*How did you come to be an influential member of the Situationist International? Were you surprised by the merry month of May [1968]?*

It was Henri Lefebvre, to whom I'd written, who put me in contact with Guy Debord.<sup>11</sup> Surprised by May? No. Happy? Yes! The [French] Revolution of 1789 wasn't born from the thinking of the Enlightenment but it is incontestable that people like Diderot, Rousseau and Voltaire weren't strangers to its insurrectionary development. If the critique elaborated by the Situationist International simply coincided with an historical turn in which capitalism discovered a new source of profit in consumerism, it is, on the other hand, undeniable that Debord's *Société du spectacle*, Khayati's *De la misère en milieu étudiant* and my *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*<sup>12</sup> had an influence on the Occupations Movement of May 1968 that continues

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Sinet, a French artist and caricaturist (1928-2016).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the letter from Guy Debord to Raoul Vaneigem dated 31 January 1961: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-31January1961.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Translated into English as *The Society of the Spectacle*, *On the Poverty of Student Life*, and *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, respectively, by various different translators.

to spread clandestinely. A deathblow was dealt to the “truths” that had been seen as immutable for millennia: hierarchical power, respect for authority, the patriarchy, fear and contempt for women, the hatred of nature, the veneration of the army, religious and ideological obedience, competition, rivalry, predation, sacrifice and the necessity of work. Since then, an idea has gained ground: real life can’t be confused with the survival that reduces the destinies of women and men to those of beasts of burden and predation [respectively].

*You broke with the Situationist International by noting its manifest failure to transform society but also in order to “absolutely remake your coherence” on your side.<sup>13</sup> How did you experience those political divisions at the personal level? What lessons did you draw for the struggle?*

The triumph of consumerist colonization and the failure of our project of generalized self-management were very difficult. Despair reaffirmed its grip<sup>14</sup> and a good number of the enemies of the commodity became its adepts. The experience dissuaded me from all political commitments, all participation in groups. Consumerist colonization certainly submerged radical thinking, but life itself didn’t stop asserting its rights all over the world. The pauperization that is increasing everywhere threatens this state of wellbeing, which, as the reality of purchasing power shows, can only be maintained through the persistence of lies. I count on the life present in each person to spark an awakening of consciousness, to rid individuals of their cretinizing individualism and to return to them the intelligence that makes each and every person an interconnected – quite simply: a human – being.

*An epicurean, you praise “refined laziness”<sup>15</sup> and you denounce the alienation of salaried work. Yet you publish like there’s no tomorrow.*

I am not a hedonist (the ideology of pleasure is a falsification of it). I am not part of the cult of writing. I know nothing about writer’s block; I only fear not being able to write down an idea that I might forget. I only write because of an inner necessity to push further thoughts that might participate in the awakening of human consciousness called for by the people’s great planet-wide anger.

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<sup>13</sup> See Vaneigem’s letter of resignation, dated 14 November 1970 and published in Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International* (1972): <http://www.notbored.org/resignation.html>. For Debord’s scathing response, see his letter to the remaining members of the SI dated 9 December 1970: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-9December1970.html>.

<sup>14</sup> In 1974, Vaneigem chose to use a pseudonym (“Ratgeb”) when he published *De la grève sauvage à l’autogestion généralisée* (Editions 10/18), translated by Paul Sharkey as *From Wildcat Strike to Total Self Management* (Bratach Dubh, 1981). He didn’t publish anything under his own name until 1979, when he brought out *Le Livre des Plaisirs* (Encre), translated by John Fullerton as *The Book of Pleasures* (Pending Press, 1983). But it wasn’t until 1986, when he published *The Movement of the Free Spirit*, that he finally seemed to regain his sea legs.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, *Éloge de la paresse affinée* (Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1996), translated by NOT BORED! as “In Praise of Refined Laziness” (2006): <http://www.notbored.org/laziness.html>

*You have always advocated the absolute freedom of expression against all censorship. Tragic events in Europe (the attack upon Charlie,<sup>16</sup> but also the recent murder of a professor in France<sup>17</sup>) show that the right to blasphemy is no longer guaranteed as it was before (even if many paid the price for it). What do you think?*

Blasphemy only has meaning to a religious mind. Religion has always been the heart of a heartless world. When social struggle has made the *vital organ* of a radically new society beat, we will then see the collapse of Christianity, which was previously so powerful.<sup>18</sup> The liquidation of class consciousness caused by the trade-union and political bureaucratization of the labor movement, and especially by the tidal wave of consumerism, has allowed the worst poison in the world – money – to instill itself in the heart of society. Just as Christianity profited from the disintegration of the Roman religions, Islam has had no difficulty in gathering up the debris of Christianity. No amount of repression will bring it to an end. The only way to destroy its deadly grip is the return to the living that is implied by existential and social insurrection. In the battles of civil disobedience, neither skin color nor hair color, neither gender nor belief systems, count for anything.

*We are living through a significant public health crisis. What precautions have you yourself taken? Do you understand the [reasons for the] limitation of some of our freedoms in this context? Do you think that this [pandemic] necessitates a coordinated, centralized action, undertaken by the State, something often criticized by anarchists?*

In *L'insurrection de la vie quotidienne*,<sup>19</sup> I evoke the possibility of healthcare self-defense.<sup>20</sup> A relationship of trust between patients and caregivers who make use of technical means will revoke the fear that kills more than the virus.<sup>21</sup> This panic, today propagated by Goebbels' methods,<sup>22</sup> permits the State to enrich *Big pharma*<sup>23</sup> and its shareholders at the expense of public health, education, and the public good (our *res publica*). Humanity is in the process of dying so that an economy in which mad money spins round and round, digging its own grave, can survive.

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<sup>16</sup> On 7 January 2015, in response to “satirical” depictions of Muhammad published by *Charlie Hebdo*, two Islamic extremists shot up the magazine’s offices, killing 12 people and injuring 11 others.

<sup>17</sup> On 16 October 2020, a French middle-school teacher named Samuel Paty was murdered and then beheaded by an Islamic extremist who took exception to the teacher showing cartoons of Muhammad to his students.

<sup>18</sup> Both events mentioned by the interviewers concerned blasphemy against *Islam*, not Christianity.

<sup>19</sup> *L'insurrection de la vie quotidienne: Textes et entretiens* (Grevis, 2020), not yet translated into English.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. “Decretons l’autodéfense sanitaire,” translated by NOT BORED! as “We Decree the Self-Defense of Our Health” (2020): <http://www.notbored.org/self-defense.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> More than 250,000 Americans have died due to Covid-19 since February 2020. There are no reliable statistics on how many Americans have died of fear.

<sup>22</sup> The clear implication here is that the Coronavirus pandemic is *one big lie*.

<sup>23</sup> English in original.

*Are you aware of the upheaval in the ecosystems, and how do you explain that our behavior takes so much time to change?*

How would you like the States and the multinationals, for which life is nothing with respect to immediate profits, to be concerned with the [changes in the] climate? The embittered passivity of those who are resigned to their fates is worse than the tyranny of the masters. We have seen what *Nuit Debout*, the *Indignados* in Spain and the anti-austerity movement in Greece have produced.<sup>24</sup> There is no other solution than a return to basics. The [worsening] conditions of existence, economic and bureaucratic devastation, the poisoning of foodstuffs, and the dehumanization suffered by the people have become the motors of a generalized insurrection (even if it is intermittent). Real democracy will come from local initiatives that are globally federalized. I refer the reader to my analysis of the ZAD<sup>25</sup> developed in *Contribution à l'émergence de territoires libérés de l'emprise étatique et marchande*.<sup>26</sup> We have always been induced to reason according to the logic of the macro-society. For market reification, the subject doesn't exist. Numbers are a dead object. Today, subjectivity is coming back to life [*s'ébroue*]. The important things are that I have the desire to live and that I fight daily against what prevents me from doing so. It isn't the number of protestors that creates their strength, but the sensible intelligence that progresses among individuals and unifies them, keeping them away from populist dumbing-down, the individualism that turns people into idiots and seeks a scapegoat in order to assuage their frustrations.

*The feminist movement has evolved a great deal in the last few years. What do you think about it?*<sup>27</sup>

It has taken a long time to understand this: the liberation of women and the renovation of nature are inseparable. It will be up to the new society, which is slowly emerging from limbo, to surpass the confrontation between the ultimate arrogance of the failing patriarchy and a feminism that, motivated by a blind desire for vengeance, claims the rights to the worst prerogatives of men. Imagine: celebrating the wonderful victory of Thatcher's mob! The wonderful emancipation of [a woman] becoming a government minister, a prefect of police, a soldier, a cop, a torturer, a businesswoman! The human being is the future of men and women; it is the surpassing of [the opposition between] masculinism [*virilisme*] and feminism.

*What is your opinion of Belgium? Does this difficult-to-govern country mean something for you? How do you see its future?*

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<sup>24</sup> *Nuit Debout* ("Rise up at night") was a French social movement that opposed the El Khomri labor law (2016); the *Indignados* was a Spanish anti-austerity movement (2011-2015); and the anti-austerity movement in Greece was active in 2011-2012. All ended in defeat, presumably because they failed to rally "those who are resigned to their fates."

<sup>25</sup> ZAD is short for "zones à défendre" (zones to be defended).

<sup>26</sup> *Contribution à l'émergence de territoires libérés de l'emprise étatique et marchande: Réflexions sur l'autogestion de la vie quotidienne* (Payot-Rivages, 2018), not yet translated into English.

<sup>27</sup> *Publisher's note*: the question of feminism was removed from the paper version and transferred to the online version [of this interview].

I refuse to identify with a geographical entity.<sup>28</sup> I don't care if I'm Belgian or Iroquois, but I was moved by the Belgian woman who, questioned about the effects of confinement and the closure of bars [to slow the spread of Covid-19],<sup>29</sup> said she was outraged because "it is a whole way of living that is being destroyed."<sup>30</sup> I love Belgian fries; I relish having a Westmalle Tripel, a Bush, a Rochefort, a St. Feuillien Grand Cru;<sup>31</sup> I am very attached to my Picard dialect. I have nothing in common with those sheep who, in the name of "Belgium," continue to vote for their butchers. That which kills the joy of living feasts on carrion.

*You often address yourself to young people in your writing. What suggestions do you have for a young person (let's say 16 years old) today?*

Learn to live, not crawl like a dog at which one barks orders. Refuse voluntary servitude, experiment with modes of society in which it is no longer necessary to degrade yourself for a handful of *dollars*.<sup>32</sup> But what right do I have to give advice, and why should you keep it in mind, if you don't feel in yourself the desire to live that way?

*A Belgian theater group, the "Raoul Collectif,"<sup>33</sup> today stakes claim to your name (and your heritage). What do you think about it?*

It is a testament to friendship and complicity that helps people to live. Little by little, such scattered elements are creating the project of mutual aid that Kropotkin dreamed about.<sup>34</sup>

*Gramsci once said, "the old world is dying, the new world is slow to appear and, in this semi-darkness, monsters come forth."<sup>35</sup> How to avoid them?*

We are in the midst of a transformation in civilization; the old one is dying, the new one is being born, fearing its own novelty. The monsters will disappear when we banish the fear that gives

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<sup>28</sup> It would seem obvious that Belgium is a "difficult-to-govern country," not because of its geography, but because it encompasses three different linguistic communities (French, Flemish and German).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Jennifer Baker, "Belgium has Europe's worst Covid-19 infection rate. What did it get so wrong?" published 2 November 2020, NBC News: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/belgium-has-europe-s-worst-covid-19-infection-rate-what-n1245738>.

<sup>30</sup> A search for the phrase *c'est tout un art de vivre que l'on détruit* brings up nothing but links to this very text.

<sup>31</sup> These are all Belgian beers.

<sup>32</sup> English in original.

<sup>33</sup> Founded in February 2009, and supported financially by a governmental organization (the Wallonia-Brussels Federation), this group – *five young white men* – writes and performs their own plays. They do not seem to engage in any mutual aid projects, at least none are described on their website: <http://www.raoulcollectif.be>.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, first published in Russian in 1902.

<sup>35</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, written in Italian between 1929 and 1935, published posthumously.

them their true substance.

*Finally, we typically ask the people whom we interview to recommend something for us to read. What do you propose?*

Once again and always (especially reflecting on putting its ideas into action), La Boétie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire*.<sup>36</sup> But the best reading, the most difficult and enthralling, remains the reading of oneself.



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<sup>36</sup> Estienne La Boétie was a French anarchist, judge and political philosopher (1530-1563). His *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* was published posthumously and clandestinely.