

# Obscurantism is Always the Light Source for Power

Raoul Vaneigem

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## Translator's Introduction

Raoul Vaneigem, along with Guy Debord, was one of the principal theorists of the Situationist International. Active with the SI from 1961-1970, Vaneigem's most well known book, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, contains the slogans that frequently made it onto the walls of Paris during the May 1968 uprising.

In an era marked by increasing terrorist slaughter via drones and suicide vests, the *Fifth Estate* offers this original translation of Vaneigem's reaction to the January 7, 2015 events, when two al-Qaeda trained jihadist gunmen stormed the Paris offices of the French magazine, *Charlie Hebdo* (or *Weekly Charlie*), and murdered 12 staff members. They also killed several others that day at additional locations.

Their stated motivation? The magazine's caricature of the Prophet Mohammed.

Although the news shocked the Western world, some on the French left and elsewhere, refused to accept the refrain, *Je suis Charlie* ("I am Charlie"), stating that the magazine's mockery of Islam generated racism against Muslims. However, none thought the assault was justified.

On January 11, two million people, led by more than 40 world leaders, staged a national unity rally. Almost four million people joined demonstrations across France.

Vaneigem's response elucidates the need to understand that incidents like this and recent bombings cannot be separated from the current global context. Religious and political justifications for murder are not new, but the reasons for which they are committed have only become more palpably senseless. Vaneigem shows how the intent is to carefully craft emotional outrage and grief to be expressed on behalf of only certain people, and allowed to go only in certain directions.

To most Americans, the names of the journalists and periodicals mentioned in Vaneigem's essay are unknown. We have provided several footnotes on people and why they are significant.

"Clientelism" is commonly mentioned in Vaneigem's recent writings. This is similar to "cronyism" in the United States, granting favors, money, or services to politicians from "clients" in exchange for political support. Everything else Vaneigem has to say on words and ideologies and their application to obscure, manipulate, and justify needs no further explanation.

The translators thank Donald Nicholson-Smith, former Situationist and longtime friend and translator of Vaneigem, for his assistance and suggestions.

- Michael Desnivic

## Obscurantism is Always the Light Cast onto Power

"L'Obscurantisme a toujours été le mode d'éclairage du pouvoir," Raoul Vaneigem, 2015. Translated from the French by Michael Desnivic and Habiba Dhirem-Kasper.

*There are some things we don't laugh at  
And not enough of them!*

—Scutenaire

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<sup>1</sup>Pisser, "piss" in French.—Trans.

Stupidity is a cluster bomb. It not only taints intelligence, its favorite target, it spreads by tearing holes in consciousness which start to *leak*<sup>1</sup> out everywhere. Those—essentially managers—of the statist and political world have celebrated their incontinence by their actions of grace, which have been doubly beneficial for them. The nobles, in total immunity, thank Heaven—perhaps even Allah—for disposing of a handful of irreverent people. At the same time, they gave themselves, with the help of a French national ceremony, clerico-secular and republican, the luxury to sanctify the inheritors of the freethought of Daumier<sup>2</sup> and Steinlen<sup>3</sup> as martyrs, using the right that everyone has to totally soil flags, religions, political and bureaucratic swindlers and the paladins in power (those that elbow their out of any ludicrous situation). After all, they had displayed a great deal of moderation, if one compares *Charlie* to *L'Assiette au beurre*, *Pere Peinard* or Zo d'Axa's *La Feuille*.

Without a doubt we have not laughed enough at this ecumenical requiem mass while celebrating the virtues of an exemplary civilization that never fails to destroy human values to the profit of market value (the Lehman Brothers were the only ones absent at the parade of mannequins which would have pleased Bernard Maris<sup>4</sup>).

Once the shockwave had passed, so well recuperated by those in power, what is left for us in the debris? The same psychological and social chaos, ever profitable to multinational enterprises and banking mafias. The reinforcement of the only function still assumed by the State: repression (from whom and from what? Move along! Nothing to see here!). The clientelism of the Left and the Right. Humanitarian hypocrisy and the victims in search of culprits. The strategy of scapegoating (“it’s not the system that crushes me, it’s my neighbor”).

Ideology, finally, is everything that’s in the sewer [*a l’égout*] and in the ego [*a l’ego*] of intellectuals. Ideology proliferates ideas that, separated from life, empty substance from them and are only false pretenses. In the 19th Century up until quite recently, we fought, tortured and massacred for ideologies like in the 16th Century, where some Biblical ass-hair would have you burned at the stake for them.

Yesterday, the good communist scripture hid the gulags, nationalist sermons sent millions of men to the frontlines and socialist eloquence hid the solidarity of the corrupt everywhere under the table of evangelical values that applied the phrase “kill one another” (to which Rwandans and Yugoslavs obeyed without the need of a religion).

Ideas come and go, but corpses stay. This is what Lautréamont used to refer to as an “intellectual bloodstain.”

With all the emotions provoked by the murders at *Charlie*, I did not hear one cry for life. But it was not the Republic, France or freedom of thought that was attacked, it was our right to live as we wish (I mean life, not simply survival, where everyone does what they’re told to do). I am not saying that this cry has gone unheard. Millions of people felt that what was really attacked was their humanity. I only think that consciousness has not yet gone through the labor that it needs to truly be born. Whereas emotional obscurantism always seems to find a job.

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<sup>2</sup>Honoré Daumier (1808-1879): French subversive printmaker and painter whose work mainly attacked the European political and social order.—Trans.

<sup>3</sup>Théophile Steinlin (1859-1923): Swiss-French painter whose work often appeared in the satirical magazine *L'Assiette au beurre*.—Trans.

<sup>4</sup>French novelist, economist, *Charlie Hebdo* journalist and appointed member of the General Council of the Banque de France, a victim of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.—Trans.

We must return to the basics, to how we are currently living and how we wish to live, without falling into the trap of symbols and abstractions. It's not going to be easy. The great political balloons have popped while we still paddle in the garbage that they were filled with.

What happened to yesterday's ideologies that were once so powerful? Clientelism gutted them. Programmed statements only retain resonance as a mediated fart. On the other hand, we are surrounded by the words of Rabelais: "[Ideologies] frantically twirl in the air because the throat that uttered them, where they wish to return, has been slit."

We kill life, and words go around in circles.

What is freedom of thought without the freedom of living? A message of "yeah, yeah, whatever" is used for anything. Power does not care about the good of the people, it stomps on them with words with its boots on. Military boots are no longer necessary.

Under the enormity of the lie that the economy broadcasts all day long, there are those that are submissive and those whose fear of tomorrow persuades them to swallow the bitterness of the present; those that become impoverished get enraged and desperate under the iron heel of profit. Everything takes place under the lie of words.

Life is today at stake in a veritable battle. It's inside all of us. Under the hangover of despair, this adulterated alcohol easily causes stumbling and the changing of one behavior to its opposite. In between resistance and passivity, we wish this line could be more visible. Currently it's unclear. However, the stakes are clear. Resignation and its vicious helplessness create with disturbing ease the constantly fearful, the suicidal, killers and terrorists (so-called to distinguish them from police misconduct, the militias of multinational corporations, the real estate promoters throwing families on the streets, the stockbrokers multiplying the unemployed, the destroyers of the environment, the poison-makers of the agro-business industry, the lawyers of the Transatlantic market whose laws take over those of nations).

Wanting to live opposed and against everything is another choice, more passionate, more difficult: we are alone and have everything to create. If we don't do this, we will sink into violence by turning it against ourselves, against our fellow humans.

It is not true that words kill. Words only serve as alibis for killers. When energy doesn't nourish the joy of life, it invests itself in hatred, resentment, reprisal and vengeance.

With its fear of desire, of nature, of woman, of a free life, religion is a great reservoir of frustrations. It is not by coincidence that the desperate will fetch words from their religions that permit them to satisfy their taste for death; words with sacredness that invent, in the same blow, what they need and what hurts them: blasphemy.

Blasphemy only exists for the believer, all that is needed is to move words around as empty shells and refill them: attacking the politics of the Israeli government is anti-Semitic, writing "no master, no Allah" is Islamophobic, denouncing pedophilic priests is to hurt a Christian's faith. I don't remember who said it: "give me a sentence from an author and I will have him hanged."

Endemic violence is everywhere, produced and stimulated by an economic system that ruins the resources of the planet, impoverishing everyday life, menacing the very survival of populations. Multinationals tend to favor local conflicts and a war of all against all. What better conditions other than chaos can be used to loot the planet with impunity, poisoning entire regions by fracking or the exploitation of gold mines? It's a much cheaper strategy than to move into absurd confrontations with people who, with a little reflection, would probably denounce the maneuvers of exploiters and unite against them.

Go ahead and play the game of sponsors by giving more importance to certain types of killers over others. What would you label that lunatic in Norway that massacred 77 people in the name of ethnic purity? And the student on any beautiful morning that decides to kill his classmates in cold blood?

Encouraged or not by religious factions or ideologies, stupidity has the same origin: boredom, frustration, ignorance, despair, the sensation of being trapped feeling like the only way out would be a great jump into the abyss.

We need to break this trap of the commodity economy. On its pathway, it never allows the opportunity to live.

A big laugh will have to emerge on the other side of desperation, a universal laughter that will leave no chance for commerce to turn mankind into an object.

The laugh of the joy of life will be rediscovered.

Raoul Vaneigem

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