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Six Questions for Raoul Vaneigem

“A Radical Change Is At Our Door”

Raoul Vaneigem, Javier Urdanibia

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Question: Rapprochement.

At the start of 1961, you sent a text – “Fragments For A Poetics,” which included several poems – to Henri Lefebvre, who passed it on to Guy Debord. That same year, you became a visible member of the S[ituationist] I[nternational]. Can you be explicit about your reasons for your rapprochement with the SI?

Answer: Destiny is not random. From the depths of a provincial town where revolt appeared condemned to impotence because the unusual voices that had tried to be heard there were soon after silenced, how could I not be dazzled by Paris? It was a town where, one would say, a sneeze was enough for the entire world to catch a cold. However, if I had not floundered in everyday boredom and the dissipation that exorcises it, if I had not lived through the disgust of ceaselessly repeated days and the rage to [want to] throw them up into the air, would I have been impassioned by the *Critique of Everyday Life* to the point of writing to its author, Henri Lefebvre, through whom I would

meet Guy Debord, and open to me a future to which I would aspire in the despair of never reaching it?

At the time, I'd composed an essay of global poetry that mixed together music, phonetic belching, film scraps and biting denunciations, with the praiseworthy intention of angering the masses. In it I was trying to illustrate a subversive version of "Poetry made by all, not by one person," which Lautreamont had not disavowed, at least [not] in his intentions. I have remained loyal to the idea, borrowed from Holderlin, of a poetry that recovers its etymological sense of *poiein*, to make, and its fundamental substance as *carmen*, the song and charm that Orpheus used at the peril of his life. One of the major qualities of the situationist movement was the fact that it began with the aspiration to abolish – by means of individual existence – an unlivable world by creating a society based on the irrepressible desire to live. Here also resided the surpassing of the group, which was condemned to become ossified, and the returning of the individuals [involved] to the creation of their own destinies.

Q. Disappointment.

Some have postulated an opposition between "Debord the Hegelian" and "the ultra-Romantic Vaneigem" and his "revolutionary romanticism" ("well received by the youngest"). Is there something true to this? Are you aware of the existence of two theoretically and "vitally" different "styles"? After the break or the separation [of Vaneigem from the SI], how have you intellectually and practically lived the reconstitution of your own individual coherence, which is at the same time an empathetic and supportive coherence?

Answer: My amicable relations with Guy Debord were built upon a shared haste to be done with the universe, finally, with an impossible life. Before turning to obsidional fever, the idea of the group in peril was the guarantee of our solidarity. We felt we were mandated by history – which we would make – to execute the death sentence that market civilization had pro-

life from the economic expropriation in which it finds itself reduced to an object of market negotiation.

Raoul Vaneigem

August 2007

of the body that rises from and returns to it, all parts of the base see to it that they never separate off. The will to emancipation is always threatened. It takes the risk knowingly. “We are not a model,” a Tsotsil woman said. “We are an experiment.”

At the exit from San Cristobal, there is a base that one can describe as experimental. Without being Zapatista, it is part of the movement. It appears to me to illustrate what can be created by a poor society from the moment that life is the only wealth that is taken into account. Situated on twenty hectares, the *Centro Indigena de Capacitacion Integral* (or Cideci) forms an autonomous and rebellious territory that only takes help from the international solidarity that is freely offered.

Whoever desires it receives the teaching of his or her choice for free. One can also find at Cideci a shoe-repair workshop, as well as departments of carpentry, metallurgy, computers, weaving, official and traditional medicines, music, literacy, architecture, organic agriculture, clothing, embroidery, food, masonry, industrial design...

Starting at the age of twelve, students are admitted, without any other age limit, without preliminary exams or particular abilities. A single condition is required: one must have the desire to study and be in love with knowledge. This knowledge will not be converted into cash, but propagated in the peasant communities from which the students come or in which they judge it useful to teach their arts by forming other schools, as well as by volunteering to be companions in the struggle for autonomy.

It is well understood that the specificity of such an experiment is not exportable. Nevertheless, a question arises: What lessons can be learned? And what gives this question a universal resonance is – in the midst of the crisis of our parliamentary democracies, all of which are eroded by corruption and manipulated by multinational corporations – the urgency with which we must invent a direct democracy that is founded on human rights, a democracy that will involve the liberation of everyday

mulgated against itself. Nevertheless, the veritable separation, the one that distanced us [from each other], was in each of us. We incarnated the negative and this negativity gnawed away at us. Our friendship was founded on hedonistic exuberance and a critical rigor, paradoxical in that its clarity, thrown upon the old world, concealed what remained archaic in our compartment. The convergence between *The Society of the Spectacle* and *The Treatise on Living* corroborated the fact that the objective analyses of Debord and I (who was more centered upon subjectivity) were reached by two different routes. It is in the spectacular logic of situationism and its salesmen that one creates [*bricoleur*] a Debordism and a Vaneigemism on the model of the ideological oppositions that are practiced in the intellectual arena where confrontation lends interest to the nullity of thought. One is far from the real question, which is to know by what lack of clairvoyance we privileged the coherence of the mind by neglecting the incoherence that the work of the mind introduces into an existence that we were content to abandon to the cult of pleasure instead of making it the primary matter of an awareness capable of founding the happiness of all on the happiness of each.

Q. The Critique of Religion.

One of the most notable aspects of your work concerns the Christian heresies, considered as resistance to the dogmas and moral and political discipline of the Church (the Cathars, the Brothers of the Free Spirit, etc.). There’s a “family resemblance” between these heresies and the modern revolutionary movement: insurrection and utopia. Your short book *Heresies* (1994) ends with the following paragraph, which one could describe as optimistic.

The French Revolution and modern capitalism would deal mortal blows to the European religions by taking temporal and penal power away from the Church. [...] Little by little, Catholicism and

Protestantism reduced themselves to the state of ideologies. In the last years of the 20th century, they would not escape from the fate of the totalitarianisms and the forms of monolithic thought.

On the other hand, last year [Noam] Chomsky said,

Typically, there exists an inverse relation between extremist religious beliefs and industrialization: the more modernization is important, the less it tolerates religious extremism. Nevertheless, in the United States this correlation is totally broken. One can thus speak of an underdeveloped necessity.

This is why your position on this subject is particularly polemical.

The alleged return of religion only represents one of the regressions in which the past manifests itself through an artificial and fleeting resurgence. They are only spectacular and self-parodying archaisms. By eroding our modes of belief and traditional ways of thinking to the benefit of short-term calculations, planet-wide mercantilism makes the religions and the political ideologies into simple economic elements on the balance sheet [*l'échiquier*] of its needs. It reintroduces or gets rid of them according to the market's judgment of their necessity or superfluity.

The revival of religious variants doesn't only take place in the United States; the clumsy and reactionary presence of the Church has increased brutally in old, rich and enlightened Europe. What is your current attitude, given that religion is now omnipresent? And, to remain on the theme of religion: At a

– such as machismo and the patriarchal spirit – that are incompatible with a real democracy. The importance of women hasn't ceased to grow in the “councils of good government” and in the instances of decision-making in which the principle “lead by obeying” has the permanent control by the base as its guarantee.

The midwives work in association with “health promoters” in micro-clinics that are everywhere. Each village has a school and its “education promoters.” The children play – there are obviously no child soldiers – taking care of the youngest ones, and they are taught the vernacular language and Castilian, their own culture, the opening to the world, the sciences and the observation of nature, which they protect, not due to an ecological vocation but because it is a part of their existence. The invitation to read, write, count and study – born from the struggles of a people who have had nothing for centuries – has inherited from the Zapatista uprising, not the pretense to be everything, but the resolution to live instead of survive. For the Zapatista Indians and Mestizos, to be themselves is to become human beings entirely apart. No one is paid, nor lacks anything essential, which is furnished by the community. No diplomas, competition, rivalry or social success open [*hachurant*] the horizon of sordid ambition.

Appropriational rivalry is abolished by the collective exploitation of the land by all and to the profit of all. One only expects of the one who is instructed that he or she instructs the others. Insurrectionary experience and the feeling of resistance found a will for autonomy that, spurred on by the desire to progress, feels the need for a vaster knowledge. Emulation and curiosity draw from it a singular determination that, though occasionally and apparently uncertain and casual, remains unshakeable in its principles: to count on its own basis, to develop self-management, and to refuse all relations with the central State, its regional offices and the multinationals that manipulate them according to their interests. Like the consciousness

Marx's remark – "The philosophers have only interpreted the world. It is now a question of transforming it." – merits specification. It is not through thought separated from life that we will change the world; it will be through the awareness of our daily existence, of the life that tries to emancipate itself by propagating what's free, the refinement of desire, and generosity.

Q. The second of these questions concerns what you can tell me of your recent experiences in Mexico – a place, among so many others, where the problems at hand seem far removed from those of our European context.

Answer: I saw in the indigenous peasant communities, which number among the poorest in Mexico, an emancipation movement – both intense and slow – in which a reality that I've never observed anywhere else is sketched out: a direct democracy founded on true human progress. The Zapatistas of Chiapas have undertaken to resist all forms of power by organizing themselves and practicing autonomy. Those "without faces" who have the faces of all are in the process of showing humanity its true face. By seizing seven towns in Chiapas on 1 January 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation hasn't simply drawn the attention of five continents; it has also shown that the revolution imagined in 1983 by six guerrillas (five men and a woman), passably crazy, taken refuge in the jungle of La Selva, has passed through the improbable and become engaged in a process of practical realization. The land, already portioned and a source of conflict, is cultivated collectively. The popular assemblies are sovereign. Children are involved in them and have the right to intervene. No one proposes him or herself as a candidate; at one moment or another, everyone – with their agreement – is tasked with a precise mission, which they execute as [best] they can and then report back to the communities.

From the beginning, the indigenous movement conjointly declared its specificity and its will to eradicate the archaisms

time when – from Salman Rushdie to the Danish caricatures of Mohammed – the question of the niqab and the hijab, the meaning of jihad, have increased tension and polemic, the publication of your book *The Art of Not Believing in Anything* (which included a reprint of the *Book of the Three Imposters*) provoked no reaction from religious monotheists. What's necessary to produce them?

Answer: By putting an end to the agrarian economy, its opposition to progress [*immobilisme*], and the monarchic State that was its emanation, the French Revolution and free markets dealt a mortal blow to religion. It was in vain that the Restoration wanted to reestablish the nobility and the Church. Ideology supplanted belief and, as it were, devoured it. And so, what's happening today? Free exchange, the source of liberalism and its formal freedoms, has become a closed world, the immobility of which is not without analogy to that of the *Ancien Regime*, which it had initially broken. Market freedom has become tyranny. Money is no longer invested in capitalist dynamism and private initiative; it reproduces itself in a vacuum, in the financial bubble condemned to implode. This world has no future; the imbecilic frenzy to get money has emptied its present of all passion and intelligent living.

How couldn't such financed despair bring back in its nets the old beliefs that were only ever justifications for death: religion and the promise of a posthumous happiness, nationalism and the collective suicide of war? True terrorism is actually the resignation to self-destruction that espouses the logic of a world that destroys itself in the name of profit. It is a caricatural, hollow and empty faith that has gotten rid of religious faith: the faith in money. There are no longer [any] religions; there are only mafias for which the rackets of the old dogmas and outdated ideologies only serve as cover for the noise of the cash register.

I wasn't troubled by the silence that welcomed my book *On the Inhumanity of Religion*, published by Denoel, because the

tumult of the allegedly resuscitated religions is only an echo in an empty barrel. Theological discourse has lost its substance to the profit of ideology, and ideology has been devalued into an ecumenical clientelism in which the other side means here [*l'envers vaut l'endroit*], provided that the power of money triumphs.

Dechristianization hasn't stopped. American evangelism and Islamism serve to cover over confrontations of the mafia type that end up disconcerting the believers. Doubt installs itself among the Muslims, revolted as much by the barbarity of their internecine battles as by the profits made by groups for whom religious fanaticism is only the auxiliary of greed (this is also the case with the so-called Marxist-Leninist factions in Latin America and the Philippines).

A religion won over by humanism is a religion that has lost itself. And I think that true human values, those of life above everything else, will sooner or later supplant the crude hypocrisy of humanism.

Q. Post-Treatise Agitation.

The new state of the world, the aggression against nature, the new needs and the new (and old) incompetence, the menacing nuclear cover under which we survive, hunger, and illness – don't they require a new form of international combat, while the numerous tics and ideologies of classic Leftism constitute serious obstacles to the very desire for emancipation? Tell us how you justify the optimism that you've never renounced and that can be seen in your remarks on "the collapse of the pimps for and structures of [*des souteneurs and soutenements*] the past" and the idea that, "for the first time in history, complete emancipation is in the hands of mankind."

Answer: I attempted to respond to this question in *For An International of the Human Kind* by emphasizing that – emerging from the fixed and unproductive mass of financial capitalism, condemned to self-destruction – there is a neo-capitalism disposed to ensure new profits by exploiting renewable energy-

sources. I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist ("Pessimists! What had you hoped for?" Scutenaire wrote). I think that this neo-capitalism offers us an absolute weapon against it: what's free [*la gratuité*]. Nevertheless, it is a weapon that will escape our grasp if we do not establish a system of self-managed collectives in which we ourselves produce (and do so for our usage) the free things that capitalism is preparing to charge us dearly for (the proposition by a multinational that it would assure free biofuels to Indian peasant communities if they would accept the usage of transgenic rape seeds is exemplary in this regard). Yes, I think that a radical change is at our door. What we lack most is awareness. To reconstruct our lives and our environments is the only way to destroy the world of the commodity that destroys us. Despair has not ceased to be one of the best allies of oppression. To be convinced of this, it's enough to observe the ravages that fatalism causes, even among the enemies of market tyranny. The despair of the masses, with its surges of blind revolt, is the best auxiliary of the national and international mafias of power.

Q. To conclude, I pose to you two questions of enormous interest.

The first question concerns philosophy. The objective that you propose is "to accomplish the surpassing of religion and its master servant, philosophy." Isn't it possible, on the other hand, to find in the many historical episodes of philosophy manifestations of thinking that are autonomous and, in large part, subversive? Is this route hopeless at the current moment?

Answer: As subversive as it was, philosophy only ever desacralized religion and secularized its principles of sin, guilt, atonement and sacrifice. Philosophy counts on the mind instead of founding itself on life. The concepts of theory and practice only reproduce the duality that presides over the exploitation of man by man: that of manual labor and intellectual work.