

“The Insurrection of Life” An interview with Raoul Vaneigem¹

Forty years after May 68, what lessons can you teach someone who is 20 years old today?

I am neither a master thinker nor a teacher of lessons. I only want each person to learn to lead his or her life according to his or her own desires and in their richest aspects: the experiences of a person in the process of humanization, of freeing him- or herself from what reduces him or her to the status of a commodity. Setting up one’s life as a model for others freezes it in a form that empties it of its substance. I limit myself to illustrating my attempts to live better in a world in which I know that the happiness of a single person is inseparable from the happiness of all. Basing oneself on the drive to live in order to refine it seems to me the best and the most pleasant way of constructing one’s destiny counter to the shackles of an economy that exploits people and the earth. He or she who makes his or her life conform to the dominant criteria of success and failure has already renounced life.

You’ve written that “May 1968 produced an earthquake and a break with the past of a magnitude never before seen in history.”² Does it remain that now?

Even if discarded ideologies and old religious decrepitudes are now hastily being patched up and used to feed a despair from which the greedy commercialism in power can profit, they can’t for long hide the transformation of civilization that May 68 highlighted. The break with patriarchal values was and still is definitive. We are heading towards the end of the exploitation of nature, work, exchange, predation, separation from oneself, self-sacrifice, feelings of guilt, the renunciation of happiness, the fetishism of money, power, hierarchies, the contempt for and fear of women, the subordination of children, intellectual lineages, military and police despotism, religion, ideology, and repression and its deadly releases of built-up tension. This isn’t a settled matter; it is an on-going process. It only requires more vigilance, more awareness, more solidarity with what’s alive. We need to rebuild ourselves in order to rebuild on human foundations a world that has been ruined by the inhumanity that propagates the worship of commodities.

“When the situationists emphasized the unlivable character of market civilization, everything seemed to be arranged to contradict them,” you’ve written.³ How has the situation gotten worse?

¹ Raoul Vaneigem, “L’insurrection de la vie,” interviewed by Gilles Anquetil and François Armanet, *Le Nouvel Observateur* #2266, 10 April 2008. Translated by NOT BORED! 10 May 2021. All footnotes by the translator.

² Raoul Vaneigem, *Entre le deuil du monde et la joie de vivre : les situationnistes et la mutation des comportements* (Gallimard, 2008). Not yet translated into English.

³ Ibid.

In the 1960s, the economy was flourishing and consumption opened the doors of self-service democracy to the proletariat, heralding the era of happiness with fanfares of commercial euphoria. The situationists were the only ones to foresee the anger that, sooner or later, the wave of consumable hedonism, which exacerbates frustrations, would arouse. Nevertheless, their hypothesis of an unavoidable revolt was judged at the time to be fanciful, even ridiculous. Today, now that free trade has tightened its deadly grip on the entire planet, not just consumption, but survival itself is threatened by the destruction of the biosphere and growing pauperization. In addition to the miserable poverty of consumerism, there is now the fear of losing the adulterated goods for which we must pay more and more money. Never before have we been so close to life and so far from daring to seize hold of it. And yet, I'm willing to bet on this: beneath the obscurantism, the servility and the laws [by, for and] of the strongest and most cunning, a life force is at work, called upon to recreate itself ceaselessly. Nothing will prevent radical thought from progressing and subterraneously undermining the spectacle in which existential indigence is presented as a virtue.

Do you still think that, in our society, the supreme imposture consists of confusing life and survival?

As I wrote in the *Traité*:⁴ “Survival has until now prevented us from living.” In May 68, what was expressed with the lucidity of a brusque and brutal revelation was nothing less than the refusal of survival in the name of living. The pandemic of voluntary servitude in evidence today will not last long. The decline of the economy of exploitation involves a new alliance with nature in which life will reclaim its rights and will surpass survival, which is life in an economized form.

After the publication of *Société du spectacle*⁵ and the *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, recuperation was at work. Can anyone escape this infernal trap?

At this stage, nothing of the most radical part of the Situationist International has been recuperated. The fact that situationism⁶ sells books, T-shirts and reputations has no importance. Radicalism doesn't haggle over prices [*ne se marchande pas*]. Whatever image of me the spectacle presents, I have the pleasure of never collaborating with any of its enterprises. Even if the fetishism of money still has the aberrant power to reap immense, immediate and ephemeral profits from uselessness and useless lives; even if silence continues to surround the project of an international of the human being, sketched out almost 50 years ago, I still think that the night of awareness will not last long. The garrote of money, which restrains and deflects the development of natural energies, will be cut by the most salutary cleaver⁷ of all, which is the irresistible primacy of life.

⁴ Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, published in 1967 and translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.

⁵ Written by Guy Debord, published in 1967 and translated as *The Society of the Spectacle*.

⁶ Situationist critique turned into an ideology or a set of simplistic slogans, usually condemning “the media.”

⁷ The French word used here, *couperet*, can also mean “guillotine blade.”

You write that “work, the refusal of which we have always advocated, today exercises a doubly harmful effect through its absurdity and increasing scarcity.” Is there an alternative?

Those who glorify work today are the same ones who close down businesses in order to gamble on them in the stock market or sell them off in stock market speculations. Because the tyranny of work has been absorbed by the tyranny of money, a large void with monetary value has seized minds and bodies. The powerful breath of death spreads everywhere. Along with fear, despair has become the best weapon for market oppression. It makes hope profitable by making its decline into a universal truth that proclaims “get used to this miserable present because tomorrow will be worse.” Thus it is time to become aware of the available opportunities for individual autonomy and the creativity of each person. Even in the opinions of its promoters and developers, financial capitalism is sooner or later condemned to an implosion. And yet, under this sclerotic form, there is a revitalized capitalism taking shape that plans to make renewable sources of energy profitable and to have us pay for them, even though they are now free of cost. We are “offered” bio-fuels on the condition that we accept transgenic canola cultures; eco-tourism facilitates the pillaging of the biosphere; wind-turbine farms are built but have no advantages for consumers. It is here that we can intervene. Natural resources belong to us; they are cost-free; they must be placed at the service of cost-free living. Collectives will be responsible for assuring their energy and food independence in order to free themselves from the grasp of the multinationals and the States subjugated by them. We have the opportunity to appropriate natural sources of energy for ourselves by reappropriating our own lives. Therein resides the creativity that will free us from work.

Why do you feel more solitary than ever before?

My solitude differs from isolation; it is populated by feelings of solidarity. The partisans of the will to live do not need to know each other in order to recognize each other. The fight of a single person for life is everyone’s fight. We have not yet managed to prioritize desire, creation, inventiveness and poetry over daily routines, the boredom of work, and tearful indignation. However, though it is patiently inculcated, the habit of bowing down has never stopped anyone from standing up straight. Someday, the walls of existential gloominess that the political lackeys of greedy commercialization have built up around us will once again bloom with Loustalot’s words, which, though they date from the French Revolution, have lost nothing of their insolent novelty: “The great ones only seem great⁸ because we are on our knees. Let’s get up!”⁹

What outrages you the most today?

Passivity, fatalism, voluntary servitude, the fetishism of money, predation, concentration-camp education with its principles of rivalry, competition and obedience to the economy, the sterilization of the earth through the transformation of the living into commodities, and the lack

⁸ The French phrase used here, *les grands*, means both “the greats” (the major figures of the day) and “big” or “tall” people.

⁹ Armand Elisée de Loustalot, *Les Révolutions de Paris* (1789).

of creativity of those who claim to fight against barbarism, but who use its weapons and not the power of life.