

“Obscurantism has always been power’s way of illuminating things”

By Raoul Vaneigem¹

There are things one doesn’t laugh about.
Not enough!

– Scutenaire²

Beastly stupidity is a fragmentation bomb. It doesn’t only hit intelligence, which is its favorite target; it spreads by piercing minds, which leak all over the place. Those from the governmental and political worlds (managers mainly) have celebrated their incontinence through acts of thanksgiving, which were doubly profitable to them. These notables have been able, with complete immunity, to thank heaven – even if was Allah’s – for having rid them of a handful of irreverent people.³ At the same time, on the occasion of a French-national, clerical-secular and republican ceremony,⁴ they indulged in the luxury of sanctifying as martyrs to free thought the inheritors of Daumier and Steinlen,⁵ who were exercising the right, recognized in every person, to shit on all of the flags, religions, political and bureaucratic swindlers, and power’s palotins⁶ (including the very people who jostled for position at that Ubuesque event). If you compare *Charlie* to *l’Assiette au beurre*, *Père Peinard* or Zo d’Axa’s *la Feuille*,⁷ they showed a lot of moderation. There’s no doubt we haven’t laughed enough about this ecumenical mass that celebrated the virtues of an exemplary civilization, which never stops destroying human values

¹ Raoul Vaneigem, “*L’obscurantisme a toujours été le mode d’éclairage du pouvoir*,” published on 19 January 2015 by *El Batia Moûrt Sou* # 71. Posted online 12 February 2015 by La Voie du Jaguar: <https://lavoiedujaguar.net/L-obscurantisme-a-toujours-ete-le-mode-d-eclairage-du-pouvoir>. Translated by NOT BORED! 30 May 2021. All footnotes by the translator.

² Louis Scutenaire (1905-1987) was a Belgian surrealist much admired by the author. Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, *Louis Scutenaire* (Seghers, 1991).

³ Virtually the entire editorial staff of *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical weekly magazine, murdered by jihadists on 7 January 2015 because of alleged blasphemies against Islam and the Prophet Mohammed.

⁴ Cf. the very large rallies and marches held on 10 and 11 January 2015, sometimes called the “*marches républicaines*.” The rally on 11 January 2015, the one to which Vaneigem refers, drew almost four million people.

⁵ Honoré Victorin Daumier (1808-1897) and Théophile-Alexandre Steinlin (1859-1923), two celebrated French satirical artists and caricaturists.

⁶ Henchmen in Alfred Jarry’s play *Ubu Roi* (1896).

⁷ All anarchist (and sometimes) satirical weeklies, published in France between 1901 and 1936, 1889 and 1902, and 1897-1899, respectively.

to the profit of market values (all that was missing from this parade of mannequins was Lehman Brothers, whose presence would have amused Bernard Maris⁸).

After the shock wave, so well recuperated by the people in power, what remains in the wreckage? The same psychological and social chaos, which is so profitable for the multinational corporations and the banking mafias; the reinforcement of the sole function still performed by the State: repression (of whom? of what? keep moving, there is nothing to see here!); the cronyism of both the Left and the Right; humanitarian hypocrisy and victims in search of guilty parties; the strategy of the scapegoat (it isn't the system that is crushing me, it is my neighbor); and, finally, ideology, flattering to the sewer and the egos of intellectuals,⁹ the ideology in which proliferate ideas that, separated from life, empty it of its substance and present mere simulacra of it.

From the 19th century until not so long ago, people fought, tortured and massacred for one ideology or another, as in the 16th century, when a slight biblical infraction [*un poil de cul biblique*] could get you sent to the stake.

Not so long ago, fine Communist speeches concealed the gulags; nationalist sermons sent millions of young men to the front lines; socialist eloquence hid the ubiquitous solidarity among the corrupt under the table of their evangelical values, which say, "Go kill each other"¹⁰ (to which the people in Rwanda and Yugoslavia¹¹ have adhered but without having any need of religion to do so). Ideas pass, the guts remain. That's what Lautréamont called the intellectual bloodstain.¹²

In all the emotions provoked by the *Charlie* assassinations, I haven't heard the cry of life. It isn't the Republic, France or freedom of thought that has been attacked; it is our right to live as we wish (I speak here of living, not of the survival in which each person does what he or she is told to do). I'm not saying that this cry didn't ring out. Millions of people have sensed that it was their very humanity that was attacked. I'm merely saying that consciousness has still not given birth to the idea. Whereas emotional obscurantism finds uses everywhere.

We must get back to basics, to what we live and want to live, without being trapped by symbols or abstractions. That is not so easy. The big political balloons have burst, but we continue to trudge through their debris.

What remains of the ideologies that, only yesterday, were so powerful? Cronyism has eviscerated them. Programmatic declarations only have resonances as media farts. On the other hand, we are surrounded by the kind of words that Rabelais evokes: they turn panic-stricken in the air because the throat that uttered them, and to which they want to return, has been cut.¹³

Life is assassinated and words spin around in circles.

⁸ An economist, writer and journalist who wrote for and was killed at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*.

⁹ The French here, *ce tout à l'égoût et à l'égo des intellectuels*, contains an untranslatable pun.

¹⁰ Perhaps an allusion to *Tuez-vous les uns les autres: La vie et la mort chez nos amis les bêtes*, a book by Frédéric Lewino (Grasset, 2007).

¹¹ In 1994, genocide was perpetrated against the Tutsi in Rwanda and, post-1991, the country once known as Yugoslavia devolved into a multi-sided civil war.

¹² Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, *Isidore Ducasse and the Count of Lautréamont in the "Poésies" Lautréamont* (1958): <http://www.notbored.org/ducasse.pdf>.

¹³ Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, *Salut à Rabelais! : une lecture au présent* (Complexe, 2003).

What is freedom of thought without the freedom to live? An “eternal cause” to be used for anything at all. Power doesn’t give a fuck about the people; it tramples them with words instead of boots. Military boots are no longer even necessary.

Under the enormity of the lie that the economy spreads all day long, there are those who bend their backs, those whose fear of the future persuades to swallow the bitterness of the present, and those who become impoverished, enraged and full of despair under the iron heel of profit. All this takes place under the lies of words.

Today life is the stakes of a real battle. It unfolds in each person. The hangover of despair, that adulterated alcohol, easily makes one vacillate and go from one form of behavior to its opposite. We’d like it if the boundary between resistance and passivity was clear, but it isn’t. And yet the stakes are clear. With dreadful ease, resignation and its embittered impotence create ordinary scared people, suicides, killers and “terrorists” (so named to distinguish them from blundering cops, the militia of the multinational companies, real estate developers who throw families out into the streets, speculators increasing the numbers of unemployed people, the ravagers of the environment, the poisoners from the agricultural industry, and the legal experts of the Transatlantic Market whose laws prevail over those of individual nations).

To want to live despite it all is the other choice, and it is the more exciting and more difficult one: you are alone and everything must be created. It’s that or fall victim to violence by turning against yourself and your fellow human beings.

It isn’t true that words can kill. Words only serve the alibis of killers. When energy doesn’t nourish the joy of living, it gets invested in hatred, resentment, the settling of accounts and vengeance.

With its fears of desire, nature, women and free life, religion is a huge reservoir of frustrations. It isn’t by chance that those who are desperate draw from it the words that allow them to satisfy their taste for death – words whose [alleged] sacredness invents blasphemy, which hurts and yet is needed by it.

Blasphemy only exists for the believer; it is enough to turn words into empty shells and then refill them: if you attack the policies of the Israeli government, you are an anti-Semite; if you write “neither master nor Allah,” you are an Islamophobe; if you denounce pedophilic priests, you injure the Christian’s faith. I no longer remember who said this: give me a phrase by an author and I will hang him with it.¹⁴

Endemic violence is everywhere, produced and stimulated by an economic system that ruins the resources of the planet, impoverishes everyday life, and even threatens the very survival of the population. The multinationals have a vested interest in encouraging local conflicts and the war of all against all. What better condition is there than chaos if you want to pillage the planet with impunity, poison entire regions with shale gas or exploit gold-bearing lodes? It’s an inexpensive strategy to involve in absurd confrontations people who, with a little reflection, might denounce the maneuvers of the exploiters and join forces against them.

So go play the game of the bosses by according more importance to certain categories of assassins than to others. In which category would you place the lunatic in Norway who

¹⁴ Attributed to Cardinal Richelieu: “If you give me six lines written by the hand of the most honest of men, I will find something in them which will hang him.” Cf. Jehiel Keeler, *The Cyclopedia of Practical Quotations* (1896).

massacred [almost] a hundred people in the name of ethnic purity?¹⁵ Or the grade-schooler who, one fine day, coldly killed his classroom companions?

Whether or not religious or ideological factions encourage it, beastly stupidity has the same origins: boredom, frustration, stupefaction, despair and the feeling of being trapped, which [it seems] only a big leap into nothingness can relieve.

This is the snare we break out of by breaking the market economy. In its grasp, there are no opportunities for life.

A great burst of laughter must break out on the other side of despair – a universal laugh that will leave no opportunities for commerce, which makes people into things.

The laughter of the joy of life when it has been rediscovered.

¹⁵ On 22 July 2011, Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people as “a preventive attack against state traitors” whom he deemed guilty of “ethnic cleansing.”