

# “The rebirth of the human is the only growth that is acceptable to us”

by Raoul Vaneigem<sup>1</sup>

The punches that liberty has landed upon the capitalist Hydra that is suffocating it have made the epicenter of seismic disturbances fluctuate ceaselessly. The territories that are globally drained by the profit system are now confronted by a surge of insurrectionary movements. We struggle to keep up with the successive waves of events, to react to the continual upheavals that are paradoxically both foreseeable and unexpected.

Two realities are violently clashing and fighting. One is the reality of the lie. Beneficiary of the progress of technology, it works to manipulate public opinion in favor of the existing powers. The other is the reality of what is lived every day by the population.

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<sup>1</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, “La renaissance de l’humain est la seule croissance qui nous agree,” *La Voie du Jaguar*, 23 November 2019: <https://lavoiedujaguar.net/La-renaissance-de-l-humain-est-la-seule-croissance-qui-nous-agree>. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 2 December 2019. All footnotes by the translator.

*Added 28 December 2019:* in the “manuscript” version of this text (a Word document) that is being circulated informally, it is preceded by the following undated note, signed “R.V.”:

“To one and all: I am putting together a small book titled *Texts et entretiens sur l’insurrection de la vie quotidienne* [Texts and Interviews about the Insurrection of Everyday Life], which will be published by éditions Grevis in April 2020. I have added to these interventions, which occurred between November 2018 and August 2019, a few remarks that might contribute to the on-going debates and struggles in France and the world at large. The late date of the publication of this book suggests to me that, starting now, I should distribute on the social networks these remarks about *the rebirth of the human*. Reading them might be useful because of the imminence of the governmental comedy of the French municipal elections, and because of the insurrectionary ebbs and flows in which the smallest initiatives by individuals and collectivities, animated by the rediscovery of life and the human sense, are increasingly important. You are free to do with them what you wish.”

On one side, using empty words employed by business jargon, they demonstrate the importance of numbers, surveys and statistics; they devise false debates whose proliferation masks the true problems: existential and social demands. Every day, their media windows stream with the banality of financial schemes and conflicts of interests that only affect us through their negative consequences. Their wars of *profitable devastation* are not ours; they have no other goal but to dissuade us from conducting the only war that concerns us, which is the war against globally propagated inhumanity.

On one side, according to the absurd truth of those in power, *things* are clear: demanding one's human rights is anti-democratic violence. Democracy thus consists in repressing the people, in dispatching against them a horde of cops who push the impunity guaranteed by the government and the opposition candidates who are avid to succeed them to the point of fascist behavior. Imagine the convulsions of the media *zombies*<sup>2</sup> if it should happen that the immolation of a victim of pauperization ends up setting the [whole] system that was responsible for it on fire!

On the other side, the reality lived by the people is also quite clear. We can't be made to say that the constraint of low-paying work, the bureaucratic pressure that is increasing taxes and lessening the amounts of retirements and other social benefits, and the wage pressure that diminishes life to mere survival can be reduced to mere *objects* of market transactions. Lived reality is not a number; it is the feeling of indignity, it is the feeling of being nothing between the claws of the State, a monster that is hardening into a skin of sorrow due to the puncture wounds of international financial misappropriation.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, it is in the clash of these two realities – one imposed by the fetishism of money, the other claiming to be the living – that a spark, often a very small one, sets off the whole powder keg.

Any instance of futility today can unleash the violence of repressed life, of life that is resolved to break [apart] that which threatens it with extinction.

Age-old inertia, lethargy that was comforted so well by the old recipe of “Bread and Games,” founded the formidable power of voluntary servitude. Already denounced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by La Boétie,<sup>4</sup> voluntary servitude remains our most implacable enemy. It attacks us from within; it favors a propensity that acts on many people like a drug: the will to exercise power, to assume the role of guide. *Someone's* authority very often infests the libertarian milieu with its

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<sup>2</sup> English in original.

<sup>3</sup> Note that *La Peau de chagrin* (“The Skin of Sorrow”) is the title of a novel by Honoré de Balzac (1831).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Étienne La Boétie, *Discours de la servitude volontaire* (1576).

morbidity. And so we must rejoice at the determination of the Yellow Vests<sup>5</sup> and the insurgents of everyday life to ceaselessly reassert their refusal of leaders, self-proclaimed delegates, master thinkers, and political or union-based god-bothersers [*grenouilles de bénitier politiques et syndicales*].

Some want to die in peace, waiting for death in the conjoined comfort of coffin and TV room, and they are free to do so, but we will not let their senility infest our will to live.

What we want is the sovereignty of the human being. Nothing more, nothing less!

Pauperization strikes at the door with an increasing violence that will smash it down. It is the end of the hedonism of these days that hammers out this consumerist and governmental slogan: “Enjoy today because tomorrow will be worse!” The worst will be here now if we continue to accommodate ourselves to it. Let’s stop believing in the all-powerfulness of capitalism and the fetishism of money. We’ve learned that the great macabre farce that makes the world dance no longer obeys anything but a sordid motivation, that of short-term profit, the absurd rapacity of a bankrupt shopkeeper scrapping the bottoms of his drawers.

I’m not talking about hope. Hope is only a trick of despair. I’m talking about the reality of all regions of the earth where an insurrection of everyday life – call it what you will – has undertaken the dismantling of the dictatorship of profit and the toppling of the States that have imposed it upon the people, who are supposedly represented by them. What we want isn’t tomorrow, it is right now, which was very well expressed by the caregivers, the nurses of both genders, the emergency physicians and the doctors who are confronted by an economic management that has dehumanized the hospital sector.

The system that exploits the natural world and human nature has lead-sealed the horizon globally. The lid of financial viability at any price has left no way out for the generosity of life and the human sense that favors practical action.

Quite obviously both the exploiters and the exploited are persuaded that the pot is going to explode. Violence is unavoidable. That’s not the problem. The question to be resolved without any ambiguity rests upon a choice.

Will we tolerate it if the social explosion leads to a state of endemic civil war, a chaos of vengeance and hatred that will ultimately benefit the various multinational mafias, which will be free to pursue their project of lucrative desertification with impunity and to the point of [mutual] self-destruction?

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, “Concerning the ‘Yellow Vests’: Everything is possible, even self-managing assemblies in the middle of street intersections, villages and neighborhoods” (December 2018): <http://www.notbored.org/yellow-vests.pdf>.

Or will we create micro-societies that are free from governmental and market tyranny, federated territories in which the intelligence of individuals can free itself from the herd-like individualism that lacks a supreme guide who will lead it to the slaughterhouse? Let's finally dare to take in hand our own destinies and level off a social jungle where the beasts of burden have no other freedom than that of electing the predators who will devour them.

In 1888, Octave Mirbeau wrote, "The sheep head to the slaughterhouse. They don't say anything or hope for anything. But at least they don't vote for the butcher who kills them or for the bourgeois who eats them. More beastly than the beasts, more of a sheep than the sheep themselves, the voter names his butcher and chooses his bourgeois. He even fights revolutions to conquer this right."<sup>6</sup>

Aren't you tired and bored of flipping (from generation to generation) the same durable piece of money, which has the truncheon of the Order on one side, and the humanitarian lie, on the other?

There isn't any "vote for the lesser evil"; there is only a totalitarian democracy that revokes the direct democracy exercised by the people and for the people. Let me say in passing that I am very amused by a slogan that, though summary, calls for more advanced reflection: "Macron, Le Pen, Mélenchon – same battle of assholes!"<sup>7</sup> (I would have preferred "same battle of cowards" [*même combat de capons*], but the rejection of all forms of power and dialogue with the State is one of the small pleasures from which come great waves of individual and collective enjoyment.)

### **Autonomy, Self-Organization, Self-Defense**

The bodies of power will not tolerate it if the people free themselves from their tyranny. We must prepare ourselves for a long struggle. The one against voluntary servitude will not be the least. The only foundation upon which despotism can prevail is the security-conscious belligerence [*la hargne sécuritaire*] of those who are resigned, the suicidal resentment of an allegedly silent majority that in fact screams out its hatred of life.

The best defense is always to go on the offense. For this principle, which has been amply demonstrated by the military tradition, I would like to substitute that of

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<sup>6</sup> Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917), a French writer, journalist and art critic. The passage that Vaneigem has quoted appears in *La Grève des Électeurs* (Paris, Temps Nouveaux, 1902).

<sup>7</sup> "Macron, Le Pen, Mélenchon, même combat de cons!" Emmanuel Macron is considered to be both a centrist and a liberal; Jean-Marie Le Pen is considered to be far right; and Jean-Luc Mélenchon is considered to be a leftist.

the opening, because, in addition to breaking an encirclement, it adds the pleasure of breaking *the encampment*.

We see the opening to life at work in the ferocious determination of the insurrections currently going on. Even if some fizzle out, they return again more beautifully. We feel it in the festive character of the demonstrations and protests that continue even though they face the blindness, the deafness and the repressive rage of the government. When I speak of insurrectionary pacifism, I'm basing myself on this opening.

Insurrectionary pacifism isn't peaceful, in the bleating sense of the word, nor insurrectionary, if we mean the aberrations of the urban guerilla, the Guevara-supporting guerrilla.

I'm neither a soldier nor a martyr. I leave to life and its poetry the care of overcoming opposites so that they do not become aggravations, so that they escape the Manichean duality of pro and con. I bet on the creativity of individuals to invent a revolution of which there is no example in the past. The disarray and the uncertainties of the civilization that is being born have nothing in common with the disarray of a civilization that has only the certainty of bursting.

Philosophers, sociologists and experts in thinking, spare us your interminable discussions about the malignity of the capitalism that profits from its own agony. Everyone agrees on this point, even the capitalists. The true problems, on the other hand, have not been brought up. They are the problems of the base, those of the towns and urban neighborhoods, those of our own bodies, which are, for all that, the true deciders of our destinies, right?

The more the struggles spread globally, the more their meaning and direction gain in radicalism, in depth, in lived experience; the more they do without militant engagement, the more they mock the intellectuals, the specialists in reactionary or subversive manipulation (because manipulation treats them as two sides of the same coin). It is both in their lived experiences and in their social functions that individuals discover themselves on the terrain where their aspirations to live begin to undermine and clear away the wall that profit-making sets against them, as if their destinies stopped there.

No, we can no longer speak of the abstract man, the only one who recognizes statistics, budgetary calculations, and the rhetoric of those – lay or religious, humanist or racist, progressive or conservative – who bludgeon, blind, rape, imprison and massacre others, all the while, ensconced in their cowardly ghettos, counting on the arrogant idiocy of money to assure their impunity and personal security.

The dictatorship of profit is an aggression against the body. Entrusting to life the care of immunizing ourselves against the financial canker that corrupts our flesh implies a poetic and united struggle. There's nothing like the fire of the joy of

living to reduce the morbidity of the world to ashes! Revolution has therapeutic virtues, which is something heretofore unsuspected.<sup>8</sup>

Ecologists, are you really going to rail in favor of climate improvement at States that mock you by polluting more every day, when it is urgent to act on a terrain where the questions have nothing to do with intellectual niceties? Questions such as these:

\* How can we go from land that has been poisoned by agri-business to land that has been renaturalized by permaculture?

\* How can we prohibit *pesticides*<sup>9</sup> without injuring the peasant who, trapped by Monsanto, Total and other multinationals, destroys his own health by destroying that of others? How can we rebuild on new bases the little schools of the towns and neighborhoods that the State has ruined and closed down in order to promote a concentration camp-like education system?

\* How can we boycott harmful and useless products that harassing advertising enjoins us to buy?

\* How can we set up local investment banks in which the currency of exchange will opportunely palliate intentionally engineered monetary collapses and financial crashes?

\* How can we cut short the fiscal levies that the State uses to offset losses from bank malfeasance and undertake to invest that money in the self-financing of local and regional projects?

\* Especially this: how can we propagate everywhere the principle of that which is free [*d'une gratuité*],<sup>10</sup> which life claims by nature and that the fetishism of money denatures. Free trains and public transportation, free [health] care, free housing and free construction, gradually free artisanal and local-food production.

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<sup>8</sup> A facetious remark? The therapeutic value of the revolution was, of course, a mainstay of those who attempted in the 1930s-1960s to blend Freud and Marx.

<sup>9</sup> English in original.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, "What's Free is the Absolute Weapon" (November 2011): <http://www.notbored.org/sine-mensuel.html>.

Utopia? Are there any worse utopias than the jumble of absurd and harmful projects that set lose, right in front of the tired eyes of the TV audience, those talentless hams who invoke the specter of their traveling-salesman wars, endlessly reiterating their buffoonery about the battles of the leaders, engaging in false debates that *violate* the true existential and social questions, eclipsing State terrorism with a terrorism of minor news stories in which the suicidal madness increases with pauperization and the ambient air becomes more and more unbreathable?

Do people realize that, in their diversity, if not in their differences, the Yellow Vests and the [other] protest movements form a formidable *pressure group* that is capable of boycotting, blocking, paralyzing and destroying everything that pollutes, poisons, impoverishes and threatens our lives and our environment? Making us underestimate our power and creativity is one of the democratic mechanisms of governmental and market tyranny. The illusory force of the State rests, not so much upon its police forces, but on a propaganda effect that presses us at every instant to renounce the poetic power that is in us, the strength of life that no tyranny can bring to an end.

And so, at this moment . . .

In Chile,<sup>11</sup> the struggle against the vermin that have proliferated upon the cadaver of Pinochet has revived the awareness that everything must start from the base, that the representatives of the people are not the people, that the individualist manipulated by the herd mentality isn't an individual capable of thinking for himself or choosing the party of life over the party of money, which kills. We must leave to the people the conquest of an intelligence that belongs to them and that the diverse forms of power try to take away.

The same goes for Algeria, the Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq.<sup>12</sup> I have confidence that Rojava will transform its momentary retreat<sup>13</sup> into an offensive. As for the Zapatistas, they have responded to the economic arguments of the Socialist

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<sup>11</sup> In October 2019, a strong protest movement has emerged in Chile, first in Santiago, and then across the whole country, in response to increases in subway fares.

<sup>12</sup> Algeria has seen widespread protests since 2010; the Sudan has been undergoing a radical political transformation since December 2018; protests have been raging in Lebanon since October 2019 and in Iraq since July 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Rojava has been an autonomous region in Northern Syria since 2012. I'm not sure if Vaneigem, when he speaks of "its momentary retreat," is referring to the Turkish government's renewed series of attacks on the region since October 2019, when President Trump ordered the United States military to withdraw from it.

López Obrador<sup>14</sup> by increasing the number of their bases (*caracoles*) and their Good Government Councils,<sup>15</sup> where decisions are made by the people and for the people.

The stubborn demand for democracy in Hong Kong<sup>16</sup> has oscillated between blind anger, ready to be satisfied by the fact that parliamentarianism has been put into question everywhere, and a lucid anger whose persistence makes the gigantic pyramid of the Chinese totalitarian regime shake and tremble, raising the possibility of a financial crash. Who knows? Ivy is growing everywhere,<sup>17</sup> and the insurrectionary past of Shanghai isn't that far away.

The Sudan shakes off the yoke of tyranny and military power, while Iraq vacillates. Lebanon is a warning-shot for Hezbollah and Islamism, whose religious rags no longer hide their political-petroleum objectives. Algeria does not want a governmental paint-job. Iraq discovers that social reality outweighs the importance accorded to religious rivalries. Then there's the Catalans,<sup>18</sup> the only ones who want a State at a time when "the coldest of the cold monsters"<sup>19</sup> is riddled with arrows. But it isn't impossible that the separatists, trapped in an impasse by the iron hands that set the Madrid government against the no-less governmental *Generalitat*, will suddenly breathe in the musty odors of the Francoist cadaver that the nationalist spirit has disinterred from its cemetery. Thus it [also] isn't impossible that the separatists will recall the memory of the libertarian collectives of the 1936 Revolution, in which a real independence was forged, that is, before the Communist Party and its ally, the Catalan State, crushed them.

This is only a dream, but life is a dream and we've entered into an era in which poetry is the passage from the dream to reality, a passage that marks the end of the nightmare and its valley of tears.

To open a vital space to those who paralyze the disarray and anguish of the future – isn't this the poetic practice that constitutes the insolent novelty of the

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<sup>14</sup> The President of Mexico.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Leonidas Oikonomakis, "Zapatistas Announce Major Expansion of Autonomous Territories," 19 August 2019, *Roar Magazine*: <https://roarmag.org/essays/zapatistas-announce-major-expansion-of-autonomous-territories/>

<sup>16</sup> Hong Kong has been rocked by protests against proposed new Chinese extradition laws since June 2019.

<sup>17</sup> A reference to Houtouwan, a once-thriving fishing village outside of Shanghai that is now abandoned and completely covered in ivy.

<sup>18</sup> In 2017, the Catalan Parliament declared independence. The response from the Spanish State, then and now, has been vicious.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883).



insurrection of everyday life? Do we not see it in the decline of militancy, in the erosion of the old military reflex that multiplies little leaders and their frightened herds?

Under the diversity of its pretexts, the only demand that is unreservedly expressed today is for a full and entire life.

Who's wrong? We aren't in the tumult of foreseeable or unexpected revolts, but at the heart of a revolutionary process. The world is changing from the bottom up, an old civilization is collapsing, a new civilization is appearing.

Stuffy mentalities and archaic behaviors can be perpetuated under an ersatz modernity, [but] a new Renaissance is emerging from within a history whose inhumanity messes it up [*met en capilotade*] right before our eyes. And those eyes are slowly opening. They discover in the woman, the man, and the child the genius of experimenting innocently with unheard-of innovations, unusual energies, forms of resistance to death and universes that no imagination in the past has dared to set in motion.

We are here where everything begins.

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