

“Unity and Differences in the Insurrections in France and Chile”

By Raoul Vaneigem¹

France has occupied and continues to occupy a particular place in the revolutionary imagination. It was in France that, for the first time in history, a revolution broke the opposition to change and the obscurantism that was imposed by the reign of an economy essentially founded on agriculture. The victory of this revolution didn't signify the triumph of freedom; it only marked the victory of the free-trade economy, which very quickly smothered aspirations for real freedom.

Real freedom is freedom that is actually lived. The philosophers of the Enlightenment realized this. People like Diderot, d'Holbach, Rousseau and Voltaire engraved this obvious fact upon universal memory, as was done before them by the principle thinkers of the Renaissance – Montaigne, La Boétie, Rabelais and Castellion, to whom we owe the remark that “killing a man never defends a doctrine, it just kills a man.”

Although it was also present in a number of European countries, the struggle for freedom had a singular acuity in France. Communalist insurrections had been growing in number and intensifying there since the 16th and 17th centuries. They sought to free the towns from the tyrannical authority of the aristocratic class, whose income principally came from the peasants and serfs who worked upon the aristocrats' land. The nobles had no intention of allowing these “communes,” which were generating new sources of income, to escape from their grasp. Artisans, storekeepers, weavers and small producers were the catalysts of the emerging capitalism. They clashed with the nobility and the feudal regime that hindered their expansion.

A rumor spread like wildfire: “City air makes you free.” It helped associate the bourgeoisie, whose name comes from “burgh” (town), with the ideal of freedom, but this was in fact only its ideology. It quickly became apparent that this bourgeoisie would in its turn oppress the working class, which it exploited mercilessly, a fact documented by “*Complainte des tisseuses de soie*” [“Lament of the Silk Weavers”], written by Chrétien de Troyes (1135-1190).

¹ Raoul Vaneigem, “*Unité et différences dans les insurrections de France et du Chili*,” a letter to the insurgents in Chile, dated 31 January 2020, in response to a request for clarification concerning the notion of the “public good.” Followed by a response and news from Chile, dated 5 February 2020. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 9 February 2020. All footnotes by the translator, who can't help but feel that Vaneigem's title echoes that of the third chapter (“*Unité et division dans l'apparence*”) of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967).

Although the bourgeoisie didn't stop growing in power and oppressing the working classes, its battle against aristocratic arrogance involved – like it or not – a subversive and demanding mindset that used fearful blows to pierce the armature and walls of the regime of Divine Right, and thus caused the very bastion of aristocratic power to shake. This is what explains the contradictory character of the French Revolution of 1789: on the one hand, an astounding rise of a freedom that reveals itself to be the true future of humanity; on the other, a terrible mystification of reducing freedom to the free circulation of goods and people, both treated like commodities.

After decapitating the monarchy of the Divine Right, free trade instaurated a monarchy of profit, which was even more inhumane than feudal despotism. The Girondins and Jacobins paved the way for a kind of desacralized monarchy, for a Bonapartism in which the progress of industrialization required the enslavement of the masses. It is in this line that we find the two regimes that best illustrate the barbarism of our history: Nazism, in which Mankind becomes a pure object, and Bolshevism, in which, in the name of the emancipation of Mankind, the communist dream turns into a nightmare.

Between the fascination of these two extremes, the Western political ideal has perpetuated a toned-down form of the Jacobinism that Napoleon's conquests implanted everywhere in Europe. It is a mix of sprawling bureaucracy and public-service theater in which progressivism and conservatism perform a patched-together scene that suits current tastes. Insurgent people must know that if they disturb the spectacle by entering it, the role reserved for them is that of the corpse.

Neither absolute dictatorship nor expression of the will of the people, what is this runt engendered by financial rapacity if not *democratic totalitarianism*?

With the exception of an ephemeral government of the people and by the people, which the Paris Commune tried to promote, capitalism has never loosened its grip; it has only modernized it. Various social struggles have been sufficiently effective as punches to make the profit managers throw a few bones to the people in revolt, but insufficient as threats of total eradication to make them really tremble.

At the same time that Robespierre ordered the beheading of Olympe de Gouges,² who was fighting for the rights of women, the French Revolution had, in its famous *Declaration*, promulgated a formal version of the Rights of Man.³

² Cf. René Vienet, "Olympe de Gouges in the Pantheon?" (2013): <http://www.notbored.org/marie-olymppe.html>.

³ Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, *Déclaration des droits de l'être humain. De la souveraineté de la vie comme dépassement des droits de l'homme* (2001), translated into English by Liz Heron as *A Declaration of the Rights of Human Beings: On the Sovereignty of Life as Surpassing the Rights of Man* (2003), and reviewed by NOT BORED! here: <http://www.notbored.org/human-rights.html> (2007).

The fact that these rights have been and are still flouted by the majority of the world's governments endows them with a subversive charge, which the State has hastened to defuse and institutionalize.

During the guerrilla war in France against the Nazi occupation and the many people who collaborated with it, the Council of the Resistance was established. It was the organization tasked with directing and coordinating the different insurrectionary movements, with all the political tendencies included. The Council was composed of representatives from the press, the unions and members of political parties that were hostile to the Vichy government in mid-1943. Its programme, adopted in March 1944, foresaw an "immediate plan of action" (acts of resistance) but also included a list of social and economic reforms to be enacted upon the liberation of a territory.

We must not delude ourselves. These reforms aimed at avoiding a revolutionary conflagration, which was made possible by the arming of seditious factions. The French Communist Party worked hard to break the revolutionary hopes of the people in arms and to give them, in order to appease them, an ensemble of benefits that was in line with the *res publica* of the First French Republic. For the French people, this constituted a "public good" intended to improve the existence of the greatest number of people.

These measures, which concerned health, aid to families, unemployment insurance, workers' protection, food quality and education for all, were very quickly adopted by the majority of European countries. But not in Chile or the rest of the world. And so – and this is the height of absurdity – in their absence, in this humanitarian vacuum, the French government, which was obeying the global laws of profit, became a role model, an objective to be reached.

The French government has liquidated established social rights and sold them off to private interests; it has ruined the public hospitals; it has closed down trains and schools; it supports the big agri-businesses that poison the food they produce; it imposes energy-related and bureaucratic nuisances with scorn for the health of the citizens; it incites people to consume more and more while it increases pauperization. But above all, it crushes the joy of living under the pressure of a gloomy despair. Everywhere profit sets the rhythm for the *danse macabre* of profitable death.

An unexpected response has come spontaneously in both Chile⁴ and France. It is now one people, despite the specificities of historical evolution, that finds itself confronted by the same set of problems, by the same questions. Moreover, don't we hear the questions posed by insurrectionary resistance and self-organization being asked throughout the world and interesting [people in]

⁴ In October 2019, a strong protest movement emerged in Chile, first in Santiago, and then across the whole country, in response to increases in subway fares. Vaneigem discusses these events in "The rebirth of the human is the only growth that is acceptable to us" (2019): <http://www.notbored.org/renaissance.pdf>.

many different countries?⁵ That is to say, everywhere that the people are becoming aware of the life that they carry within them and of the death to which the State, “the coldest of the cold monsters,”⁶ condemns them.

My perception of the so-called Yellow Vest movement in France⁷ only speaks for me. It is only the testimony of someone whose personal enthusiasm has been aroused. And why? Because, ever since my adolescence, there’s never been a day I haven’t hoped for such a reversal of the order of things. People are free to draw from the jumble of my ideas what seems pertinent to them and to reject what doesn’t suit them.

The appearance of the informal and spontaneous movement of the Yellow Vests has marked the awakening of an awareness, both social and existential, that hadn’t been roused out of its lethargy since the wake-up call of May 1968.

Although it failed to put into action the project of a self-management of everyday life, the most radical tendency of the Occupations Movement of May 1968⁸ can nevertheless claim to have contributed to an authentic change in people’s mindsets and behaviors. A realization whose effects have hardly begun to be felt today marks a point of no return in the history of humanity. It has created a situation that, though open to episodic regressions, will never go back; men may be slow to agree about this, but there isn’t a single woman who doesn’t feel it in her bones [*n’en soit convaincue dans sa chair*].

The thickness of the silence that is deliberately maintained enjoins us to repeat tirelessly a truth that the hammering of the lie fails to break. The denunciation by the situationists⁹ of the *welfare state*¹⁰ – the State of consumerist wellbeing, of happiness on the installment plan – dealt a mortal blow to the virtues and behaviors imposed for thousands of years and passed off as unshakeable truths: hierarchical power, respect for authority and the patriarchy, the fear of and contempt for women and nature, the veneration of the army, religious and ideological obedience, rivalry, competition, predation, sacrifice, and the necessity of work. The idea then arose that real life couldn’t be confused with the survival that debases the lives of women and men to those of beasts of burden and beasts of prey.

⁵ Cf. Vaneigem’s run-down of some of these events in “The rebirth of the human is the only growth that is acceptable to us” (2019): <http://www.notbored.org/renaissance.pdf>.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883).

⁷ Raoul Vaneigem, “Concerning the ‘Yellow vests’” (2018): <http://www.notbored.org/yellow-vests.pdf>.

⁸ That would be the Committee for Maintaining the Occupations (CMDO), mostly composed of members of the Situationist International, to which Raoul Vaneigem had belonged since 1960.

⁹ To my knowledge, this is the first time that Vaneigem has said nothing but positive things about the situationists since he was a member of the organization.

¹⁰ English in original.

People believed that this radicalism¹¹ had disappeared, had been swept away by internal rivalries, power struggles and political sectarianism; people had seen it smothered by the government and the Communist Party, which was the final victory. It is true, above all, that it was devoured by the formidable wave of triumphant consumerism, the very same one that the growing pauperization of today is slowly but surely drying out.

We must say this about consumerist colonization: it has popularized the desecration of old values more rapidly than decades of freethinking managed to do. The phony liberation extolled by the hedonism of the supermarket propagated an abundance and a diversity of products and choices that had only one inconvenience, that of having to pay up on the way out. From this came a model of democracy in which political ideologies faded away to the profit of candidates whose promotional campaigns were conducted according to tried-and-true advertising techniques. Cronyism and the morbid attraction of power ended up ruining a whole way of thinking, the alarming deterioration of which the most recent governments don't fear to exhibit.

Where are we today? France has never known an insurrectionary movement as persistent, innovative and festive [as the Yellow Vests]. Never have we seen so many individuals free themselves from their individualism, go beyond their religious, ideological and temperamental options, refuse bosses and self-proclaimed leaders, and reject the grasp of unions and political machines. What a pleasure it is to hear the State deplore the fact that the Yellow Vests don't have people in charge who can be seized by the ears like rabbits! The people haven't forgotten this: every time an organization has claimed to manage their interests, it has trapped them, abused them and annihilated them.

Corporatist demands have created an anger that has become generalized precisely because, in addition to the repressive barbarism, the contempt and the provocations of a crooked government, it has targeted nothing other than the global system that pillages life and the planet in the name of profit.

In the streets, side-by-side, there are train conductors, bus drivers, subway engineers, lawyers, garbage collectors, opera dancers, sewer workers, high-school kids, college students, teachers, researchers, forensics experts, a small group of police officers who refuse the role of killer that their bosses assign to them, workers in the "gas and electricity" sectors, civil servants in charge of collecting taxes and duties, the owners of small and mid-sized businesses that are beset by the rapacity of the tax authorities, firefighters (who are very often in the front ranks at confrontations with the cops),¹² employees of Radio-France,

¹¹ Here Vaneigem appears to be referring to the Occupations Movement as a whole and not to the SI or the CMDO in particular.

¹² Cf. Angelique Chrisafis, "French police clash with firefighters during Paris protest," *The Guardian*, 28 January 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/28/french-police-clash-with-firefighters-during-paris-protest>.

and personnel at the hospitals where the budgetary economies really do kill the patients who are too poor to pay for private facilities.

Neighbors who'd never spoken before are now discovering themselves by rediscovering solidarity with others. There is a systematic harassment of "collaborators," just as there was during the resistance to Nazism. Government ministers, bigwigs and their flunkies can't leave their retreats without the risk of succumbing – not to fire from lethal weapons – but to tomatoes launched with ridicule, derision and corrosive humor.

A change is taking place within the national and international insurrections. The phase of blind anger, which clashes directly with the intransigence of power and its armed forces, must now be followed by a phase of lucid anger that is capable of undermining the State at its base. It is now a matter of substituting the legitimacy of popular will for the authority that the State usurped through electoral farce – a State that today is only an instrument wielded by private interests managed by multinational corporations.

We are witnessing an astounding reversal of perspective. Finally restored to its authenticity, freedom is resolved to destroy the economy of free trade, which had involuntarily and formally inspired it and then suffocated it under the growing weight of its tyranny. This is the revenge of lived freedom against the freedom of profit.

The earth of which we demand the free enjoyment isn't an abstraction; it isn't a mythical representation. It is the place of our existence; it is the town, the neighborhood, the city, the region where we battle against a socio-economic system that prevents us from living there. Because we expect nothing other than lies and truncheon blows from the governmental authorities, it falls to us to "take care of our own affairs" by getting rid of the world of business [*"faire nos affaires" en nous défaisant du monde des affaires.*]

It is up to us to lay down the social and existential foundations of a society that breaks the yoke of profitable destruction. It is incumbent upon us to dare to invest our rage and creativity in the Communes in which our existence can be reinvented in the warmth of human generosity and solidarity. Errors and fumbling around don't matter! We face the long-term task of federating at the international level a large number of small collectives that have the incomparable advantage of being able to act *directly* in the milieus in which they are implanted.

We should stop tackling our problems from the top down. The summits of abstraction only discharge numbers that dehumanize us, transform us into objects and reduce us to the status of commodities. The politics of the masses [*du grand nombre*] always inaugurates a chaos that appeals to the Black Order of Death [for sorting out]. It is no longer necessary that the heaven of ideas is the negation of our lived realities.

Truth makes the song of life resound everywhere. The human dimension is a quality, not a quantity. The individual becomes collective when the poetry of a single person shines for everyone.

Our public good is the earth. It is our real homeland, and we are resolved to chase away the mercenary invaders who mutilate it by cutting it up into market shares. Our freedom is one and indivisible.¹³

Response and news from Chile,
dated 11 pm, 5 February 2020¹⁴

For the moment, let me say to you that the struggle goes on in this long and narrow band of earth. Direct combat with the police is happening, because these days the repression is also “at home.” Moreover, what you speak about in your text is going on here, too, namely, that capital’s little bureaucrats can’t go out into the street without becoming targets of public derision.

All of the human collectives in Chile are organizing to recuperate the territories stolen and pillaged by the State and the colonializers who preceded them. An example is the recuperation of lands (400 hectares) that the Mapuche communities of the Commune de Los Sauces, Malleco Province, in the Araucanía region, carried out on the last Friday in January [2020].¹⁵

What’s coming is the generalized self-management of our needs, the total destruction of the chains that physically and spiritually bind us to the terrorist economy.

The earth will live anew and we will live with her.

Meanwhile, I send you copies of the two communiqués¹⁶ that we have just sent out.

¹³ A détournement of the famous proclamation concerning the character of the new French Republic by the National Convention, 25 September 1792.

¹⁴ The identity of the writer of this response is not known.

¹⁵ Cf. “*Nación Mapuche. Recuperación de Tierras en Los Sauces, Araucanía*,” Resumen Latinoamericano, 31 January 2020:

<http://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2020/01/31/nacion-mapuche-recuperacion-de-tierras-en-los-sauces-araucania/>

¹⁶ In Spanish, not French, and so not translated here.