

From The Land Of Proudhon 5

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Situationist International. Raoul Vaneigem In Dialogue With Gérard Berréby. Nothing Has an End, All is a Beginning.

Raoul Vaneigem (1934) is a Belgian author and radical social critic. After grammar school, at the age of seventeen he went to study literature at the Université Libre in Brussels. Once he graduated, he taught for a few years at various educational institutions. This is at a time when Belgium had strong and long strikes, which Vaneigem participated (years 1960-61). Then he was a member for almost ten years of the movement known as International Situationist (I.S.).



Vaneigem never gives interviews. But in the case of the French author Gérard Berréby (1950), endowed with a strong interest in the Situationist movement, also publisher, it was different. Berréby was extremely prepared for the dialogue. He and Vaneigem started to discuss where Vaneigem comes from, before moving on to speak about the years together with I.S. And of course about 'there after' is discussed.

The result is a book with a continuous dialogue, filled with informative notes, lots of pictures and other materials, sub-interviews by Berréby with people from the cultural environment of Vaneigem and overprintings (short articles) or other texts for further information. All this is in a lively varied layout processing. In short 'Rien n'est fini, tout commence' (Nothing has an end, everything a beginning) has become a fascinating book.

Preamble

The majority of the dialogue is devoted to developments in the Situationist movement, which Raoul Vaneigem joins in 1961. These developments include an I.S. in transformation (turning point in 1963), the experience of the peak (May '68) and then its decline. The self-liquidating in 1972 Raoul has not experienced since he had already resigned in 1970. A pressing question is how a gifted young man as Raoul becomes involved in a radical movement like I.S. The answer is to look for in the first part of the dialogue.

Vaneigem was born in a working class family in the Belgian village Lessines, located in the mining district of the Borinage. His father worked for the railroad and was a trade unionist. In that region and that environment Raoul become sensitive to what is happening in the world: the exploitation of man by man. Working conditions gave rise to a number of (fatal) accidents in that region. "We were close to this kind of events, which fed my anger against the bosses," he says. "Being thirteen, fourteen years old I had inhaled the whole atmosphere of the working environment." That atmosphere and the fury, has never left him.

Through his literature studies interested in the French poet Lautréamont, inspires him to write the essay 'Poésie et Révolution' (Poetry and Revolution). Curious about an opinion about it, he forwarded it to the French neo-Marxist sociologist and social critic Henry Lefebvre (1901-1991). Of him Raoul has already read his *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947; Criticism of daily life). To his delight Lefebvre reacts. He refers to a friend, with the advice to contact him. That friend is Guy Debord. Thus arises early in 1961 a personal contact between Debord and Vaneigem.

Turning point

"When I [Raoul] met them [Guy Debord and his wife Michèle Bernstein] at home for the first time in Paris, Guy opened a cupboard saying 'Voilà, y a de quoi faire' (Look, we have something to digest!): 15 bottles of wine. Basically, it was food, drinks and discussion." It clicked immediately between him and them. Debord and

Vaneigem understood each other immediately. "We [I.S.] have been the catalysts of confusion, aimed at the overthrow of the existing basis for the benefit of a radically new society," Raoul formulates. And Michèle Bernstein shares this. She is everything at the same time, Raoul notes: very convivial when it comes to food and drink, very precise when it comes to language; she takes part in the debate and is nowhere in the shadow of Guy.

Raoul refuses to go through for a philosopher. This is because he has little to do with interpreting the world. Because, with Marx, it comes down to change the world. In short, "if I'm working on analyzing the world, it is to change it." Interpreting must lead to politicization.

Within the situationist movement at that time there was already something going on. "When I joined in, I.S. was already shifting. The struggle against the faction of artists in I.S. as avant-garde movement began to organize itself. "Remember, Raoul notes, "that there were especially those people, like Constant, certainly a remarkable architect, who started to pull too much on the word "situationist". He was still calling its unusual constructions 'situations'. (...) And there were artists who saw themselves as avant-garde, while they were only the avant-garde of merchandize." Here I. S. must do away with, could it continue the process of politicization. In 1962-63 then the turning point occurs, by parting the artists (by successive excommunication of them). In I.S. thus political criticism succeeds art criticism.

This transition to political criticism has renovated I.S. completely, which also manifests a rupture with the idea of avant-garde. "We wanted to be no avant-garde. Yes, being individuals who sow radicalism, but without being 'spearhead of the proletariat, "as the Stalinists kept repeating. I.S. has entered its second phase.

The duo Debord-Vaneigem

Raoul can recognize himself well in this state of affairs. "Debord and I were quickly agreed on releasing the art criticism. After all, the artwork is of less importance than the critics in case of the market system. Art criticism can be passed by political criticism. Debord and Vaneigem honor therefore the same concept in case of passing by art and philosophy. Raoul: "Art in its capacity as a specialized sector did not interest us."

The bond of friendship and profound intellectual rapport unfolded spontaneously between them. What has brought on this mutual understanding, asks Berréby. Raoul explains that they have entered into a relationship without calculation or tactics. "I have never let myself walk into the trap of a power relationship with Guy. That explains why we could work for so long together. For us it was also true that the passing of the art was related to everyday life. Life had to be itself an art form ... "

"Something that has fascinated me by Debord, is his determination, his self-confidence, a trait that I have not," said Raoul. "The language of Debord has always been objective and has a philosophical force. Mine is mainly attached to the subjective analysis, notions such as sacrifice and experience. Those two perspectives have always complemented each other perfectly, "says Raoul. He recognizes that these differences in their respective texts do splash sparks to give fire for May '68: *The society of the spectacle* (Debord 1967) and the *Handbook for the young generation* (Vaneigem 1967).

"Its two tonalities do not stop the pieces matching up. As different as they are, they unite in the same subversive thought. Consequently, the two distinct interpretations culminate in a fierce hostility concerning the existing society. The positive part of Debord does emphasize on the workers' councils, self-government. Our project was the revolution and in this case we were very attached to Pannekoek [Dutch council-communist] and the councils. I emphasize the individual emancipation, albeit under protest against the individualism of the alienated individual, with the call that the foundation of all subversive action is to be found in everyday life. "

Peak, decay and self-liquidating

With this attitude I.S. participated May '68. She acts like an 'outpost'. Raoul: "We saw that a number of principles defended by us suddenly got exposure". However, he also notes, "its results went beyond our expectations. Our idea of consolidating the 'outpost' went hand-in-hand with the care of trying to prevent the enemy being able to penetrate us. There settled a new 'authority', the 'Enragés (Furious ones) with, among others, Cohn-Bendit.

Together with Berréby, Vaneigem examines what happened in that rebellious moment (May '68). At the end it does well not to ignore the observation: the recognition internationally of I.S., the victory too, at the same time, however, then announces the decline of I.S. The thing, with which Vaneigem has himself more and more

objections, was the ‘Stalinist’ slip, as reflected in the often-uncontrolled excommunications by Debord. This is discussed thoroughly by Berréby and Vaneigem.

What I [ThH] find important here to repeat is what Raoul likes solemnly. The fact has its importance for the present. Raoul: “What always has been clear to us is the radicalism. We agree with what Lefebvre says about the importance of daily life. And that is back now in the debates. Take the issue of the wearing of the veil by Muslim women. That’s ideology. However, what is important: the woman’s status! The issue of whether we should accept or forbid the wearing of the veil, that is not our concern. Conversely: that women would be subject to the male domination in an archaic patriarchy in traditional regimes in the Arab world or elsewhere, that’s the real problem.

The point is to see that the rights of women are not the same as that of the man and that is the real battle, pulling it straight away. That returns in everyday life. This also puts the emphasis in Lefebvre’s text. So again it is repeated during the dialogue: there is always a critique of everyday life, which yields subversiveness in the rejection of the prefabricated life, programmed by capitalism.

The decline of I. S. follows the self-liquidation by Debord in 1972. Preceding it Vaneigem had withdrawn in 1970. Nostalgic? No. And the books with correspondence that have appeared? It interests him. The idea of a notion of constant evolution is the only thing that interests him and “I still value the theoretical thoughts of IS, the rest ... ‘.

Beginning without end

The dialogue *Nothing has an end, all a beginning* has no introduction nor conclusion, even the contents is absent. Everything that can be mentioned as notes, images, attachments has been published between the dialogues. The dialogue opens with just an answer, that you can believe was preceded by a question: “In 1961, when I was a lecturer at the Pedagogical Academy of Nivelles ...”. Thus Raoul is introduced. Almost 400 pages further on, Berréby poses him the last question. For a taste that the old Vaneigem is still too the young Raoul, I translate here finally some paragraphs of the last two pages (pp. 392-393).

Raoul: “The destruction of life and natural resources, which the financial mafia and the despotism of the money cause today, are overwhelming and spread like a contagious disease. We see an absurd system declaring ukases in the direction of states, impoverishing populations, squandering the public domain, poisoning food, making the earth and everyday life barren, increasing despair and boredom, and all this to stir up along that road, the war of all against all.

The states play the role of servants of that absurd system. Their latest reason for existence confirms itself in exercising their repressive function. The game is clear. Whether we get into the suicide logic and we acquiesce in it to die in the gas chamber of the bankers ... or we become aware that there is no one else to help us but ourselves.

We throw the basis of that society down. And know well: we have no need for ideologies letting function schools, hospitals, transport, homes, socially useful enterprises (metal, renewable energy, textiles, natural food), to recover the public domain, becoming rubble by stock market speculations. Look at Greece, Spain and Portugal, where self-managed social centres have appeared in education, health and quality food.

They are just experiments but it is down that road, that the self-government of daily life profiles itself. It is the only practical way to give life a chance.”

Thom Holterman
Freedomnews.org

Berréby, Gérard & Raoul Vaneigem, Rien n’est pas fini, tout commence, Editions Allia, Paris, 2014, 393 pp., Price 25 euros.