

Raoul Vaneigem: The State is Nothing – Let's Be Everything

Raoul Vaneigem

An essay written by Raoul Vaneigem for the Greek antiauthoritarian movement during his participation in Thessaloniki's Direct Democracy Fest in 2010.

It's not by chance that Greece, where the idea of democracy was born, has become the first to blaze a trail in the battle that must be waged against the democratic corruption that everywhere is heightening the pressure applied by the multinationals and financial mafias. In Greece, we have seen the demonstration of a resistance that contrasts sharply with the lethargy of the European proletariat, which for decades now has lain dormant, anesthetized in the grip of consumerism and by impostures of emancipation.

Allow me to recall a few banalities. Consumerism has generalized a supermarket democracy where citizens have the greatest possible freedom of choice on the express condition that they pay the price for it on their way out.

The old political ideologies have lost their substance and have become little more than the advertising brochures that the elected officials use to increase their audience and their power. Politics, whether it calls itself left or right, is no longer any more than a pandering patronage relationship where the elected officials look out for their own interests instead of those of the citizens they're supposed to represent.

And once again Greece has found itself in a good position to restore the original meaning to the word "politics": the art of governing the city.

The second banality is that the world's States have lost the

privilege they arrogated to themselves of managing the public good. Of course, the traditional state has always taken tribute from citizens by force with taxes and duties; but in compensation, then, they ensured the proper operation of public services, teaching, healthcare, mail, transportation, unemployment benefits, and pensions... Now the world's States are no more than the servants of the bankers and the multinational corporations. Now the latter have had to face that the bubble formed by the insane amounts of money invested in financial speculation instead of in the development of priority industries and socially useful sectors is doomed to pop, with a financial crash. We have fallen prey to the managers of this bankruptcy, who are greedily scraping out the last short-term profits by super-exploiting the citizens, who are invited to fill the bottomless gap of a deficit created by bank embezzlement, at the price of an ever more precarious life.

Not only is the State no longer able to fulfill its obligations under the social contract, it is eating away at the budgets for public services, scrapping everything that guaranteed even its own survival, rather than simply letting everyone live a real life. And they're doing it in the name of that gigantic swindle baptized as "the public debt."

The State has only one function left: police repression.

Its only safeguard is the spread of fear and despair. And it ensures that spread rather effectively by lending weight to an apocalyptic way of seeing the world. It spreads the rumor that tomorrow will be worse than today. According to the state, good behavior means consumerism – hurry and spend, before you go bankrupt; try to profit off everything that can be made profitable; even if it means sacrificing your very existence and the whole planet itself to keep the generalized rip-off going.

Nihilism is the true philosophy of business. When money is all

that matters, all values disappear except commodity value. We have watched as consumerism has undermined all the supposedly eternal "truths" of the past: paternal authority, patriarchal power, religions, ideologies, the prestige of the army and police, respect for bosses, the sanctity of sacrifice, the virtue of hard work, scorn for women, children, and nature.. But at the same time it has killed consciousness, which today we must lead back from the dead, using as our guide the truly human values that have so many times been at the heart of riots, revolts and revolutions.

We know that a new alliance is now being formed with what nature offers us free of charge, an alliance that will put an end to the covetous exploitation of the earth and of human beings. It will be up to us to rescue from the aggressive grip of capitalism seeking new profits, these free energies that it's trying to make us pay such high prices for. In this sense, our era, which is currently being disrupted not by an economic crisis but by a crisis of the economy of exploitation, is also the right moment for people to become truly human beings. And becoming human means refusing to be a slave to work and power, and affirming our right to create our own destiny and situations that favor the wellbeing of all.

The course of events currently unfolding may risk accentuating the urgency with which several questions are now being posed. I will refrain from supplying any answers, since to do so outside of the practical conditions and communities where those questions will be raised would be all too abstract – and abstraction, as a kind of thinking cut off from real life, always only gives rise to the old monsters of power. I am content to merely cast some light on those questions.

1. What are we willing to do to compensate for the failure of a State that not only no longer serves the citizens, but sucks their blood to feed the octopus of international banking?

We are up against forces of inertia. Family, social, political, economic, religious, and ideological traditions have from one generation to the next constantly perpetuated the voluntary servitude that La Boétie denounced long ago. On the other hand, we can try to make the most of the shock caused by the collapse of the system and the disintegration of the State, and make good use of the temptation to look beyond the small-minded limitations of the commodity. A reversal of perspective is to be expected. Beyond the eventual pillage of supermarkets that the accelerated pauperization now underway will probably give rise to, lots of consumers threatened by exclusion won't fail to notice that survival is not life, that it's not worth it to trade off an existence where the discovery of the energies and goods lavished upon us by nature harmonizes with the attractions of desire for an accumulation of adulterated, useless products. That life is here, now, and that it only asks to be built and propagated, in the hands of the vast majority of people.

Let us cease feeling sorry for ourselves about the failed attempts at emancipation which punctuate our history, not so as to instead celebrate our occasional successes – since after all, the very notion of “success and defeat” has a bad stench of commodity limitations, tactics and strategy, and predatory competition about it – but rather so as to give thrust to experiences which, emerging in joy and audacity, are waiting for us to pursue them by implementing a project of self-organization, and assemblies operating in direct democracy.

The Zapatista collectives in Chiapas are perhaps the only groups today that are truly applying direct democracy.

Communizing the land gets rid of the conflicts associated with its private appropriation right away. Everyone has the right to participate in the assemblies, to speak up, and to tell what their choice is, even children. There are no majority-elected representatives in the proper sense. Individuals showing an interest in certain areas (teaching, healthcare,

mechanical work, coffee, organizing festivals, organic agriculture styles, external relations, etc.) are simply offered the opportunity to become officials for the collective for a limited period of time. They then enter a “good governance council” and regularly report on their task, for the duration of their mandate. The women, who at first were skeptical, because of the patriarchal customs of the Mayan people, now have a paramount role in the “good governance councils.” The Zapatistas have a slogan that defines their intent to establish a more human society, which emphasizes the need for constant vigilance: **“we are not an example, but an experiment”**.

2. Money is not only becoming more and more devalued, it is on its way toward disappearing. During the Spanish revolution, the communities of Andalusia, Aragon, and Catalonia established a distribution system that made no use of any currency (though some others did continue to use the peseta, and others invented new currencies of their own, all of them worked quite well together). Today, it is up to us to study ways of replacing relationships of exploitation, where the commercial trade in things determines the commercial trading of people, with human relationships based on gift rather than exchange.

We have become slaves to economic operations, the establishment of which signed the birth certificate of commodity civilization, altering individual and social behaviors, and setting up a permanent merging of comfort and denaturing, progress and regression, human aspirations and barbarism.

Certainly, the concrete and virtual mode of finance today still constitutes a coherent system – an absurd coherence, of course, but one which is able to go on governing people’s behaviors. On the other hand, think what might happen because of this when the financial crash strips money of its value and

utility!

Those who refuse to allow it to tyrannize their everyday lives will doubtless welcome its disappearance as a kind of liberation. The fetishism of money, however, is so deeply anchored in our morals that many people, still subjugated under its thousand year old yoke, will come up against an erratic emotional confusion, where the law of the social jungle reigns, where blind violence in search of scapegoats and the struggle of all against all rage on.

We mustn't neglect the tentacles of the octopus, cornered in its last entrenchments, because the collapse of money doesn't imply the end of predation, power and the appropriation of things and beings. When chaos, so profitable to the state and mafia organizations, is exacerbated, it propagates a virus of self-destruction, with which resurgent nationalisms, genocidal eruptions, religious confrontations, and resurgences of the fascist, bolshevik or fundamentalist plague can poison minds if the sensitive intelligence of living beings doesn't put the question of happiness and the joy of life back at the focus of our concerns.

There has always existed a kind of fascination with abjectness that after some preliminary hesitation begins to cut its secret path and expects that by winning over all the layers of the population it will guarantee impunity and legitimacy for a banalized barbarism (the rise of Nazism in Germany showed quite well how an abstract humanism can eventually transform into an explosion of total savagery).

On the other hand, the inhumanity of the past doesn't have to obscure the memory of what was most radical about the great movements of emancipation: the desire to liberate alienated man and give rise in him to the true humanity that reemerges in every generation.

The society to come has no choice but to recover and develop

history's projects of self-organization, which, from the Paris Commune to the anarchist collectives of revolutionary Spain, rooted their quest for harmony in the autonomy of individuals, with the happiness of all standing in solidarity with the happiness of each.

3. The bankruptcy of the State will force local communities to organize for the public good in a manner better adapted to the vital interests of individuals. It would be an illusion to think that it will be possible without conflict to liberate territories from the grip of the commodity and set up zones where human rights will eradicate the rights of commerce and profit. How can we protect the enclaves of free sharing we will attempt to establish within a sectioned off, policed world, controlled by a universal system of predation and greed?

From this perspective, a question that was raised by a Persian friend of mine seems particularly significant. In light of the repressive violence of the Islamist dictatorship in Iran, he brought up the problems encountered by an opposition that simultaneously came to be aware of its strength in numbers and its tragic powerlessness in the face of the brutal attacks carried out by the army, the police, and the "revolutionary guards," those gangs of paramilitary thugs whose religious power legitimates their violent acts. The thoughts that follow were written on his request.

NEITHER WARRIORS NOR MARTYRS

"If you can run a marathon, you can surely walk a block" [qui peut le plus peut le moins] is a pertinent principle for the kind of thinking that demands that action be taken, whether violent or non-violent, to resist repression by a State, party, class, mafia organization, religion, or ideology wherever it impedes the freedom of existence and expression of individuals. By examining the problem where that repression is at its most ferocious, at its most pitiless, we can draw the

consequences for countries whose democratic formalism limits the excesses of their barbarism. Oppressive conditions obviously differ greatly among countries, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, France, Italy, Russia, China, the USA, or Colombia...

To look at this issue while keeping in mind the examples of Iran, North Korea or Burma seems to me conducive to responses that would be appropriate for other countries less accustomed to the use of savagery.

Up to today, we have been faced with two alternatives: either those who made a decision to put an end to repressive violence ended up on the enemy turf and set themselves up in its place, by using against their enemies a violence that is of the same nature but in the opposite direction – or the opposition to tyranny has taken recourse to passive resistance, based on the pacifism preached by Gandhi with such unquestionable success.

Nevertheless, though Gandhism did triumph over English occupation, it was dealing with an adversary which, pitiless as it may have been, was caught off guard and saw its ability to react paralyzed by its own philanthropic formalism, residual ethics and its deontology of war, all of which tended to condemn the massacre of a hostile but unarmed population.

In spite of its hypocrisy, a kind of military fair-play felt the pinch of the tactical decision that had been made to nip the rebel movement in the bud with no delay. It is well known that lord Mountbatten's diplomatic wisdom did not entirely fail to lend support to the victory of popular demands. But when Gandhism was used to attack power structures with less ethical concerns, such as the apartheid regime in South Africa, it proved inoperative. The Burmese junta, likewise, didn't hesitate to machine-gun down peacefully demonstrating opposition crowds. Iran follows a similar logic of repression.

What response is proposed by guerrilla war? Every time it has

won, it's been for the worse. An armed triumph always leads to a bitter human defeat.

The fundamental error of armed struggle is to give priority to military objectives rather than to the creation of a better life for all. To advance into the enemy's terrain to destroy it is to betray the will to live for the will to power. The communards got hold of some cannons, but they neglected the money in the Bank of France and the use that they could have made of it, so they ended up trumped by the troops from Versailles. It's well known how militarized bolshevism crushed the first soviets, the Kronstadt sailors, the makhnovists, and, later, the Spanish anarchist collectives, all in the name of revolution. Relatively speaking, it was the same so-called communist party and the Stalinist spirit that ended up hollowing out the substance from the May 1968 movement (and this isn't about guerrilla fighting, but about the depressing persistence of the idea of power, which ended up perverting the insurrectional upsurge).

Does anyone still need to be reminded that wherever guerrilla war has triumphed – whether in Mao's China, Vietnam, Cambodia, or in Cuba – armed ideology has ended up constituting the ideological armies that have crushed freedom while claiming to be fighting for it? The repugnant slogan “power grows from the barrel of a gun” targets first of all those who resist all forms of authority. It has had fewer victims among counter-revolutionaries than among actual revolutionaries, enemies of tyranny.

Neither do we want, on the other hand, any more of what happened in Frankenhausen, where in 1535 the German peasants in revolt abstained from any resistance and let themselves be massacred by the princes' army, counting on God's help; they had forgotten the words of Bussy-Rabutin, who said that “God always marches on the side of the biggest battalions.” And for a more recent example: On December 22, 1997, forty-five people, mostly women and children, were massacred in Acteal, a

small town in Mexico, by Indian paramilitaries, in a church where they were praying. They were part of the Abejas (Bees) movement, a group of pacifist Christians who, while closely associated with the Zapatistas, demanded absolute nonviolence. The reason behind this cruelty was that the Abejas had set up in land coveted by other Indians, members of that party of corruption called the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

Aside from the disgust that such atrocities cause, can we really protest against the torturers without also incriminating the Christian inclination towards martyrdom and renunciation, which gives the cowardly such a thrill and gives the weakest such arrogant cruelty? The worst coward knows that there's no risk at all when his victims refuse to defend themselves, and even stretch their necks out toward the knife.

We will need to be more attentive to those aspects of our behavior that serve as an invitation and incite them to attack, because – even without being aware of it – we have all too often opened the door for the enemy.

How do our adversaries achieve their goals? Most often by instilling in us the absurd belief that they are all-powerful. They stimulate the fear reflex that builds up belief in the invincibility of the old world, while in fact it is crumbling everywhere. The disastrous effects of such dogma give rise not only to resignation and fatalism among the masses, but also cause the desperate courage that drives people to mount attacks with the feeling that they're going to their death in a battle as glorious as it is vain.

But what can those attacks do against the whole repressive arsenal, whose sophistication seems to suggest its ability to mount lightning-fast and unstoppable counterattacks? Omnipresent technological surveillance couldn't prevent the destruction of those towers in New York by rough and ready homemade means. Likewise, long ago, the "invincible" Maginot Line was made to look ridiculous by a German offensive that

quite simply ignored it.

If the surveillance networks have such yawning gaps in the struggle against permanently threatening destructive forces, how will they be effective against actions that do not aim to annihilate them but instead intend only to create a radically different society that would render obsolete and pathetic the gussied-up specter of Kalashnikovs and nuclear missiles?

The question remains: what do we do if we want to refuse to be defenseless against the guns of oppression and at the same time refuse to use against the dominant powers the same weapons it uses against us?

The discussion is open. I have no peremptory response to propose. I only wish to clarify the debate by making a few remarks.

The best safeguard is to not enter into the terrain where the enemy expects and awaits us. It knows all the most miniscule nooks and crannies of the territory delimited by the commodity and by the behavioral habits that it imposes (predation, competition, authoritarianism, fear, guilt, money-fetishism, greed, pandering). On the other hand, however, it knows nothing about life and its innumerable creative resources.

A preliminary precaution, then, would be to eradicate from our groups and assemblies all forms and traces of power and authoritarian organization. The practice of individual autonomy is a prerequisite for cooperative self-organization. This is what the VOCAL movement in Oaxaca is working on setting up, with its rank and file assemblies at the base transmitting its decisions to its delegates, rejecting all intrusion by parties, unions, political factions, and pandering demagogues.

True coherence can only emerge based on a project of individual and social life. The future will belong to local communities capable of thinking globally, i.e., to those that

rely on their radical approach and their broad distribution to lay the foundations for an International Union of the Human Race. This is the only way to avoid the traps of communitarianism, that product of State Jacobinism.

The neighborhood committees idea that took hold in Oaxaca, deserves an examination as a possible path. Mexico is not Iran; far from it, but it lacks the conditions we have in Europe. In Oaxaca, the paramilitaries kill people with the blessing of a despotic governor. He needs spokespeople, in whom he can find the germs of corruption inherent in power, whatever they may be. He needs parties, unions, factions. He finds them easily. And with them he feels like he's on familiar terrain again, and can crush them or negotiate with them, as the case may be.

On the other hand, neighborhood committees, in grasping things and beings by the roots, have no agenda other than to defend the interests of the local population; thus what is undertaken in the interest of a few is also beneficial to the many (such is, again, the principle that the local is inseparable from the global). The neighborhood committees are not an armed threat; so they're not a danger that power can identify. They constitute a poorly identified terrain, dealing with things like food, water and energy supplies. A kind of solidarity develops from that which, operating around apparently anodyne themes, makes mentalities change and opens them up to consciousness and inventiveness. And so the practice of equality between men and women, of the right to happiness, of improving everyday life and the environment, start to lose their abstract character and modify behavior. Treating the questions raised by everyday life as the first priority gradually renders obsolete the problems traditionally harped on by ideologues, religions, and the old politics – the politics of the old world. And so we come back to the traditional meaning of the word "politics": the art of managing the city, improving the social and psychological

space where a population aspires to live according to its desires.

We have everything to gain by attacking the system and not the men that have become simultaneously its managers and its slaves. Giving in to the emotional plague, to revenge, to pressure-releasing explosions, means participating in the blind violence and chaos that the State and its repressive bodies need to go on existing. I don't underestimate the furious relief that a mob gets out of burning down a bank or pillaging a supermarket. But we know that transgression is actually just a kind of homage to interdiction; it supplies safety valves for oppression – it does not really destroy it, it just restores it. Oppression needs blind revolts.

On the other hand, I can't see any more effective ways of promoting the destruction of the commodity system than propagating the notion and practice of freeness (this is timidly sketched out here and there already with the sabotage of parking meters, to the great displeasure of the corporations trying to rob us of our space and our time).

Are we so unimaginative, so uncreative, that we can't eradicate the constraints on us by the state and private lobbying racket? What recourse would they really have against a great collective movement that could simply declare free public transit, refuse to pay taxes and fines to the Robber Baron State, and could instead invest them for the benefit of all by providing regional areas with renewable energy equipment, and restoring the quality of healthcare, teaching, food, and environmental stewardship? Wouldn't a self-organized society need to be based on a restoration of a true politics of proximity? Instead of all these train, bus, and metro worker strikes, which block citizens from circulating, why not run them for free? That would kill four birds with one stone: it would damage the transport companies' profitability, reduce the profits of the oil lobbies, break the bureaucratic control over the unions, and above all it would bring about massive

support and solidarity from users.

We are submerged in false problems that hide the real ones. Political views – which can always be manipulated – in fact themselves manipulate what should be the basis for individual activity: the random whim of everyday desires, what experiences they urge us into, and their means of smashing whatever shackles them. What good are all the political speeches that avoid discussing the crisis that we must get out of by not turning away from it, compared to the despair of having to go to work all the time, having to become bored of consuming products, to give up our passions, to simply possess more and more, losing all the joys of simple Being to the benefit of Having, which is slated to collapse anyway?

Together with its variants of imposed emancipation (liberalism, socialism, communism), the consumerism and clientelism of the so-called democratic regimes have shrink-wrapped the class consciousness that once won social gains from capitalism. We've been dragged through blood and mud by abstract ideas. The people's Cause has fallen atop them and broken their back.

Returning to the base, the rank and file – that's the only radical approach. It eliminates the false issue mongering that feeds emotional chaos to the detriment of consciousness-raising. In this regard, the "Islamic veil debate" shows the workings of the spectacular function that recuperates and falsifies our right to an authentic life. The polemic, where justifications and curses, puritanism and laxity, oppression and freedom, interdiction and transgression are bandied back and forth, conceals a lived reality: the conditions imposed on women. The spectacle gives us a whole slew of bread and circuses with endless debates about a little trinket: symbol of voluntary servitude; deliberate provocation; folkloric manifestation; community membership; religious choice; reaction against the scorn of women shown in advertising; the erotic innuendo of hidden charms; alliance between flirting

and propriety; expression of a certain sacredness; a convenient way of preventing sexual harassment by males authorized by the patriarchal tradition to get their rocks off with the drooling stares of frustration.

But the real battle is not there – it is at the base, in the joint emancipation of men and women together; it is in the refusal of apartheid, of exclusion, of misogynistic and homophobic behavior. Enough false debates, enough ideologies! In my book “Nothing is sacred, everything can be said,” I defended the principle: tolerance for all ideas, intolerance for all barbaric acts. Our only criteria must be human progress, generous behavior, the enrichment of everyday existence.

The right to Life guarantees our legitimacy.

Power plays on people’s emotions. The irrational fear it spreads everywhere is a source of blind violence that it excels in profiting from. The advantage that local communities who want to decide their own fate have is that by giving priority to the construction of an authentically human life, their practice implies the transcendence of raw emotion and awakens poetic consciousness.

In the same way as boycotts of adulterated products from the petrochemical and agricultural mafias become inoperative without access to quality food, the will to do away with consumerism, where Having supplants Being, will not follow ethical injunction so much as it will the attraction of a free life.

Taking up the enemy’s arms means foreseeable defeat; but the opposite approach just as surely leads to another kind of obvious fact: the more the feeling that life and human solidarity are the only possible leavening for an existence worthy of the name, the more malaise and uncertainty will undermine the determination and fanaticism that drive the

mercenaries of the party of corruption and death.

There are many people who have talked about the uncertainty gnawing at a growing number of authorized killers, whether it's the Iranian "revolutionary guard," the thugs recruited by Hamas, the Israeli soldiers whose barbarism has been denounced in the Gaza Strip, the assassins in north and South Sudan, Somali looters, etc. This observation is not a tactical argument, and doesn't fall within any kind of military perspective from which to insinuate, a bit facilely, perhaps, that the enemy is digging its own grave. It's just about a probability: that we're seeing an approaching financial crash that will destroy all currency, and in the same way there is a devaluation threatening the suicidal determination that the bureaucrats of crime, the mafias of profitable barbarism, are counting on to sign up more troops (i.e., as the old religious or ideological pretexts lose credibility and the fanatics start to doubt that they're backed by some murderous God).

It is in this sense that I throw in my lot with the proliferation of a life reaction capable of fertilizing the territories desertified and sterilized by the economy of exploitation and its Mafioso bureaucracy. Our rich creativity has it in itself to discover the secret of organizing spaces and times in social and individual life at last liberated from commodity oppression. Only poetry can escape the steely gaze of power. Only the passion for life can drive back death.

TWO FOOTNOTES ABOUT SELF-DEFENSE

1. The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) is comprised of some thousands of fighters in the Mexican jungle. The women proposed and obtained, in direct democracy assemblies, that it not intervene offensively and instead limit itself to playing a defensive role. However, when paramilitary groups threatened the Zapatista villages, the EZLN kept out of it; instead, the "councils of good government" set up a human ring

around the village, formed of hundreds of partisans and sympathizers, who flooded in from everywhere. The journalists and television cameramen covered the event, making use of the spectacle to get the whole world informed about what was happening. That was enough to repel the aggressors.

2. In a story from India, the villagers went to complain to a wise man about the cruelty of a giant snake that was biting and killing them. The whistling sound it made as it approached was enough to spread terror throughout the village. The wise man went and found the snake and managed to convince it to leave the villagers in peace. But then, the villagers immediately set about mocking the snake, who had become peaceful, making fun of his weakness, and gaily provoking him; weary of their scorn, the snake slithered over to see the wise man and confessed his confusion: how am I supposed to react to this? The wise man thought about it, and said "I told you not to bite them, but no one said you couldn't whistle at them anymore."

ADDRESS TO GREEK REVOLUTIONARIES

Comrades – I have never despaired of seeing the self-organization revolution as a revolution of everyday life. Now less than ever.

I am fully convinced that by taking to the barricades of resistance and self-defense, the living forces of the whole world are awakening from a long sleep. Their irresistible, peaceful offensive will knock down any obstacle set up against the immense desire to live that nourishes the innumerable beings born and reborn every day. The creative violence of a new world's growing pains will supplant the destructive violence of the suicidal old world.

Until today, we have been little more than hybrid beings, half-human, half-wild beasts. Our societies have been vast

warehouses, where people, reduced to commodity status and considered equally precious and vile, are treated as universally interchangeable and beaten into submission. We are now inaugurating the new era, where Mankind will face up to its destiny as a creator and a thinker, becoming something, it has never been before: fully human beings.

I am not asking for anything impossible. I'm not asking for anything, in fact. I have no need for hope or despair. I only wish to see the concrete realization, in your hands and in the hands of the people of the whole world, of an International Union of the Human Race, which will bury in the past today's moribund commodity civilization and the Party of Death frantically trying to keep it up on its last legs.