

The Radical Subject: An Intellectual Biography of Raoul
Vaneigem (1934 - Present)

Alastair J. Hemmens

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Declaration

I, Alastair John Hemmens, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Abstract

This thesis proposes an intellectual biography of Raoul Vaneigem (1934-Present). Vaneigem was a member of the Situationist International (SI) between 1961 and 1970. Today the SI is widely recognised as one of the significant avant-garde groups to have contributed to the historical events that shook France in May 1968. Most people will have come to Vaneigem through his *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (1967), which he wrote as a member of the SI and was published just months before the largest wildcat strike in French history. Vaneigem is therefore of interest from a cultural history or history of ideas perspective because his work embodies both a political moment and because it emerged out of debates that are still informing contemporary theory. Moreover, Vaneigem is something of an anomaly in that he has always worked outside and against intellectual and political institutions, he comes from a working-class background and he has lived the great majority of his life in the province of Hainaut, the old industrial heartland of Belgium, where he was born. This makes Vaneigem an outsider in a world that has ostensibly been dominated by the Parisian intellectual elite.

More often than not Vaneigem has been dismissed, even vilified, by academics interested in the Situationist International. This is all the more surprising given that his Situationist comrade Guy Debord (1931-1994) has become a *cause célèbre* among the intellectual left since his death, igniting a veritable publishing industry in France and the English-speaking world. The intention of this thesis is not an attempt to earn Vaneigem the dubious acclaim that has feted Guy Debord these past decades. Rather, it endeavours to contextualise, clarify and bring out the complexity of the life and work of Raoul Vaneigem, making him the focus of a critical commentary that will reassess his place in the field.

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This thesis is dedicated to Bill and Annie Wright.

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Introduction. The Life and Work of Raoul Vaneigem in Critical Perspective

This introduction covers four main areas. First, the choice of Raoul Vaneigem (1934-) as the focus of the current work will be justified and the problematic will be identified. Secondly, the relationship between Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord (1931-1994) will be examined in order to contextualise this problematic. Thirdly, a critical survey of the extant literature will be provided so as to position the current work within the context of the wider critical field. Fourthly, the methodological approach upon which the argument of the current work rests will be established in order to create a logical progression for the argument to follow.

Who is Raoul Vaneigem?

Raoul Vaneigem was a member of the Situationist International between 1961 and 1970. Today the SI is widely recognised as one of the significant avant-garde groups to have contributed to the social upheaval that shook France in May 1968.¹ In this context, Vaneigem is largely known as the author of *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (usually translated as *The Revolution of Everyday Life* in English), which was published in 1967 just months before these events took place.²

¹ Pascal Dumontier, *Les Situationnistes et Mai 1968: théorie et pratique de la révolution (1966-1972)* [1990] (Paris: Lebovici, 1995), was the first critic to properly assess the historical evidence on the Situationist involvement in May '68. He argues that, although there were other points of reference for those involved, the Situationists were the source of some of the most extreme and original ideas in the movement, Dumontier, pp. 217-218. He notes that the use of scandal, previously the realm of the arts, was also fairly original, as was the Situationist notion of revolution as 'une vaste fête', Dumontier, p. 218. In the latter respect, the Strasbourg scandal of 1966, orchestrated by the SI, was an important factor in the radicalisation of the student movement and, he notes, Situationists, as well as pro-situs, were present in a number of the key universities, Dumontier, p. 218. As such, Dumontier argues, the SI played an important role, among other far-left groups, in the acceleration of 'le processus de radicalisation', Dumontier, p. 218.

² Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967). The second edition published in Paris by Gallimard in 1992 is used throughout the current work as the

Traité was arguably the most widely read Situationist text of the period. In this book Vaneigem provides a theoretical critique of capitalist society that embodies a full frontal attack on the forms of modern life, from work and the state to culture and mass consumption. Vaneigem condemns a mode of being that reduces mankind to a pseudo-animal state of mere survival that proliferates boredom, isolation and suffering. Most of all, Vaneigem critiques the traditional left, which, he argues, is completely complicit in the reproduction and modernisation of commodity society. In contrast, Vaneigem offers the possibility of a new civilisation founded upon the pleasure of consciously realising our individual and collective needs and desires beyond commodity fetishism.

Raoul Vaneigem has remained an underexamined figure in critical literature on the Situationist International despite his obvious contribution to the group. His erstwhile comrade Guy Debord, however, has undergone a radical reappraisal to emerge as one of the major French thinkers of the twentieth century. Andrew Hussey remarks that since the death of Guy Debord in 1994 a ‘veritable academic industry’ has developed around his work.³ There is an ever-growing collection of editions of his writing, alongside myriad biographies, critical commentaries and articles. A few years ago, Debord’s entire archive was even purchased by the French state in an effort to preserve a ‘trésor national’.⁴ As part of this, the BnF recently staged a highly publicised exhibition of this archive on site. While much of this is not the kind of attention that Debord himself would have welcomed, this effort at ‘recuperation’ has

most commonly available and for containing the additions of a preface ‘Quotidienne éternité de la vie’ (written especially for this edition) and postface ‘Toast aux ouvriers révolutionnaires’ (written in 1972). A new edition of the English translation of *Traité* has been published recently: trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012).

³ Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War, The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Johnathan Cape, 2001), p. 396.

⁴ ‘“Ce classement comme trésor national s’interprète comme une reconnaissance par l’Etat de ce que représente Debord dans la vie intellectuelle et artistique du siècle écoulé”, souligne Bruno Racine, président de la Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF), qui a largement œuvré pour que les archives restent en France’, Frédérique Roussel, ‘Debord, un trésor’, *Libération*, 16 February 2009.

also developed in tandem with more genuine attempts to improve our understanding of Debord and the SI.⁵ Yet serious consideration of Raoul Vaneigem in these studies has been strangely lacking. This is a problem for our comprehension of both Guy Debord and the Situationist International. Debord did not develop his critical theory in a vacuum. He was inarguably the most important figure in the group but the Situationist International was not the work of one man. It was a collective project. The theories, books and films of Guy Debord were the product of years of social activity and theoretical debate. Raoul Vaneigem, the only other author of the SI to publish a book-length work of theory at this time, was an important figure in this matrix of relationships. It is therefore essential that the contribution of Raoul Vaneigem to the Situationist International be assessed as part of a wider process in the critical field of developing a more complex and accurate understanding of the group.

Vaneigem greatly impacted debates within the SI, which occurred between 1961 and 1963, that clarified the ontological basis of the group's critique.⁶ At the Fifth Conference of the group that took place in Gothenburg in August 1961 his statement that 'Il n'y a pas [...] d'œuvre d'art situationniste' was a turning point in the history of the organisation.⁷ It marked the beginning of a stage in the development of the Situationist International that focused more resolutely on the creation of a coherent critical social theory and its realisation in practice. In the same speech Vaneigem set out the notion of revolutionary praxis, the 'volonté de changer l'emploi de la vie', as the basis for this new direction, defining it as 'le seul contexte où les

⁵ 'Récupération' was a term used by the Situationists to describe the process whereby radical movements and critiques of capitalist society are incorporated safely into it through cultural, economic and political appropriation over time.

⁶ In traditional philosophy, ontology refers to that branch of metaphysics that deals with issues of being and reality. In the context of the Situationists, however, reality is socio-historical as well as equally subjective and objective (because mediated by or, rather, created by human praxis). As such, the way in which I use the term ontology and the ontological in the context of this thesis refers to the Situationists' practical understanding of what constitutes reality and human being, the basic assumptions on which they can critically act. The details of these assumptions are discussed in Chapter 1 of the current work.

⁷ *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962), pp. 26-27.

situationnistes puissent *parler* de liberté d'action'.⁸ These positions were developed in a number of contributions, most notably, his first extensive text for the SI, 'Banalités de base', published in the group's journal *Internationale situationniste* between 1962 and 1963.⁹ Vaneigem was then elected as a member of the Central Council of the SI from 1961 onwards. In tandem with Guy Debord and Attila Kotányi, he played a crucial role in the exclusion of the artists from the group in 1962. Moreover, not only the publication of 'Banalités de base' but also the circulation of the manuscript of *Traité* from early 1965 onwards also had a major impact on the group. In 1966 Vaneigem became a mediating figure between students and the SI during the so-called Strasbourg Scandal that brought the group to international attention. Vaneigem then travelled to the United States in 1967 to attempt the creation of an American Section of the SI. The following year Vaneigem was on the ground in Paris during the events of May '68. Finally, his part in the so-called 'orientation debate' that hampered the SI in the post-68 period was arguably pivotal in the eventual dissolution of the group. These are just some of the more prominent moments in Vaneigem's decade of participation in the collective project of the Situationist International.

Since his resignation from the SI, Raoul Vaneigem has also proved to be a prolific author, producing no less than 34 published books, as well as a large

⁸ *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962), p. 27. The term 'praxis' here refers to the consciously creative dimension of human practice as defined by Karl Marx in his famous 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1845):

The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the Object [*der Gegenstand*], actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object [*Objekts*] or of contemplation [*Anschauung*], but not as human sensuous activity, practice [*Praxis*], not subjectively. [Karl Marx, trans. Cyril Smith, 'Theses on Feuerbach', *Marxist Internet Archive* (2002).]

This is the critique Marx makes of bourgeois thought: that it cannot grasp humanity is part of reality, that objectivity is in fact a creation of human beings through their subjective activity (thought, emotion, imagination, observation, labour etc.) in real historical circumstances. These assumptions, it will be argued, are the basis of ontology in Vaneigem. Praxis is defined in more detail on pages 67-69 of the current work.

⁹ See Raoul Vaneigem, 'Banalités de base' in *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962), pp. 32-34; 'Banalités de base (II)' in *Internationale situationniste*, 8 (January 1963), pp. 34-37.

collection of articles, editions, encyclopaedia entries, prefaces and unpublished manuscripts. While these texts have gone largely unexamined, the pre- and post-Situationist work of Guy Debord has become the subject of a great deal of critical interest and are generally considered legitimate continuations of the Situationist project.¹⁰ The lack of research on equivalent material by Vaneigem is a problem for a number of reasons. Without knowledge of the pre-Situationist writing of Vaneigem, many have tended to assume he developed the essence of his thought when he joined the SI. As such, it has been all too easy to believe that he owes most of his intellectual development to Guy Debord, rather than having developed as a thinker in his own right before this relationship began. Further, the post-Situationist work of Raoul Vaneigem covers a wide range of critical issues and subjects that were not often, if ever, treated from a Situationist perspective in the 1960s. His later work now places issues of gender and ecology at the forefront of his thought. Vaneigem has also produced a series of works on religion, even earning something of a reputation as a medieval scholar for his research on Christian heresy. These new developments in the work of Raoul Vaneigem are substantial contributions to the Situationist project and, for this reason, are just as worthy of our critical consideration as the later work of Guy Debord.

It has become unfashionable today to speak of Raoul Vaneigem as a serious anti-capitalist theorist in the same breath as Debord. However, it should be noted that both men shared the same fundamental critique of capitalist society and that this critique was developed together over a period of many years. Moreover, the critical theory of Raoul Vaneigem is still relevant to us today. His rejection of a world in

¹⁰ For discussion of the later work of Guy Debord see Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord, La Révolution au service de la poésie* (Paris: Fayard, 2001) and Len Bracken, *Guy Debord, A Critical Biography* (Venice CA: Feral House, 1997). Philippe Sollers' review in *Le Monde* of *Panégryrique, Tome 1* (1989) was instrumental in bringing this later work of Guy Debord to a wider public, see Philippe Sollers, 'Guy Debord, vous connaissez?', *Le Monde*, 2 Oct 1989.

which every person is forced to sacrifice their concrete existence to the demands of abstract economic necessity is as prescient now as it was in the 1960s. His totalising demand for the abolition of the forms of this abstraction—the commodity, labour, exchange, the state and culture—still shines in comparison to the great majority of ‘radical’ theory. In the extant literature, however, there is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding of what the critical theory of Raoul Vaneigem actually says. Key terms such as ‘volonté de vivre’, ‘mal de survie’ and ‘subjectivité radicale’ are constantly subject to myriad misinterpretations, while the Reichian developments of his later work, such as ‘la peur de jouissance’ and the centrality of the body, are simply ignored. It is crucial for our knowledge of the SI and the history of radical thought in the twentieth century that this body of theory be brought to light. The aim of this thesis is therefore to provide a systematic exposition and analysis of Raoul Vaneigem’s critical theory and his historical contribution to the SI in order to address these major lacunae in our understanding of the Situationist International and one of the most important anti-capitalist theorists of the twentieth century.

Debord: Pro Et Contra Vaneigem

Guy Debord is such an important figure in our understanding of the Situationist International that it is necessary to give an overview of his relationship with Raoul Vaneigem in order to understand the full critical context of the current work. Debord was born in Paris in 1931 but spent most of his childhood in the south of France. He enters the history of the European avant-garde in the early 1950s when he moved back to Paris and became a member of the Lettrist movement. The Lettrists were then dominated by a charismatic leader, the Romanian-born poet Isidore Isou (1925-

2007).¹¹ In 1952, after disagreements with Isou, Debord and other members of the Lettrist group broke away to form the Lettrist International (LI) that was more orientated around notions of Marxist revolution and published a journal, *Potlatch*, which ran from 1954 to 1957.¹² The Lettrist International developed a number of key theories and practices at this time that would later lay the basis for future Situationist praxis, all of which would also be adopted by Vaneigem when he joined the group in 1961. These were *détournement*, *psychogéographie*, *dérive* and *urbanisme unitaire*.

Détournement is the practice of employing pre-existing cultural artefacts—film, literature, photography, painting—in the creation of a new critical meaning.¹³ Debord, for example, uses footage taken from television and cinema in order to create his own films. He places this found footage in new contexts that radically change their meaning, such as detailing the barbarism of capitalist society or the alienating nature of leftist institutions. The Situationists would also take a literary phrase, change a word or employ other techniques such as chiasmus in order to both critique the original sentence and also improve on it by transforming its message. As such, *détournement* is also meant as a critique of the cultural sphere in general, including copyright, which was rejected in all group publications, because it implies all of the cultural works of the past can be improved upon. For Vaneigem, as is discussed in the following chapter of the current work, *détournement* could also be used as a more general metaphor for a liberated form of human creativity.¹⁴

¹¹ For an overview of Isou, see Andrew Hussey, ‘“La Divinité d’Isou”: The Making of a Name and a Messiah’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 36.2 (2000), pp. 132-142. In 2002 Isou published a collection of rather bizarre critiques against the Situationist International, see Isidore Isou, *Contre l’Internationale Situationniste*, 1960-2000 (Paris: HC-D’Arts, 2001).

¹² See Lettrist International, *Potlatch 1954-1957* (Paris: Allia, 1996).

¹³ See Guy Debord, ‘Mode d’emploi du détournement’ in *Les Lèvres nues*, 8 (May 1956).

¹⁴ See page 113 of the current work.

The *dérive* emerged out of the drunken and collective walks that Guy Debord and his friends enjoyed in Paris during the mid-1950s.¹⁵ It had its historical roots in the practice of *flanêrie* and the Surrealist notion of discovering the marvellous in the everyday city, as described in André Breton's *Nadja*.¹⁶ Unlike its forebears, however, the *dérive* had a political dimension in that it attempts to undermine the alienated organisation of the city for the needs of capital by rediscovering it as a site of adventure. It reveals the structures of alienation that define social space through a sensual awareness of its ambiance. It therefore offers a means of discovering what aspects of the external environment must be transformed in order to realise one's desires in a revolutionary society. *Psychogéographie* was the term used by the SI to define the approach to urban space that arises out of the practice of the *dérive*, which seeks to understand the city in subjective terms. Equally, *urbanisme unitaire* is the utopian critique of the modern city that emerges from these theories and practices. In opposition to an urban space organised around the fragmentation of life into the daily routine of work and consumption, the Situationists evoked the possibility of a city space united with subjective desires for pleasure, play and adventure. In this vein, and in contrast to the functionalist city of modernists such as Le Corbusier, the SI celebrated the most fantastic products of the imagination such as *Le Palais Idéal* and Neuschwanstein Castle, which, were they to form the basis for social space, would be impractical from the point of view of capital.¹⁷

In 1957 the LI merged with several other small artistic avant-garde groups—including The London Psychogeographical Committee and The International

¹⁵ See Guy Debord, 'Théorie de la dérive' in *Les Lèvres nues*, 9 (Nov 1956).

¹⁶ See Patrick ffrench [sic], 'Dérive: the *détournement* of the flâneur' in *The Hacienda must be built: On the Legacy of Situationist revolt* (England: Aura, 1996), pp. 41-53.

¹⁷ The most famous Situationist project to emerge out *urbanisme unitaire* was Constant's *New Babylon*, see below. For a detail discussion of this dimension of Situationist theory and practice, see Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus—to form the Situationist International on the basis of a text written by Debord, ‘Rapport sur la construction des situations’.¹⁸ From this point on, Debord acted as the key figure in the history of the SI both at the level of theory and personal relationships. He was the director of the group’s journal and published his major work of critical theory, *La Société du Spectacle*, in 1967. He also directed a number of films based on Situationist ideas, among them *Critique de la séparation* (1961), *La Société du Spectacle* (1973) and *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978).¹⁹ In 1972 Debord released *La Véritable scission dans l’Internationale*, a text which effectively dissolved the SI.²⁰

The most crucial contribution of Guy Debord to the Situationist International was his theory of the ‘Spectacle’. As Anselm Jappe notes, the Spectacle is often thought to refer exclusively to the media but, in fact, it refers to an entire social structure.²¹ It should therefore be understood as a totalising theory of modern society. Debord defines the Spectacle as a social relationship where lived experience has been replaced by representation.²² For Debord, the entirety of social activity is captured by the Spectacle in order to produce the continuous justification of contemporary life and the mode of production on which it is based.²³ As such, images replace reality in all realms of existence, from politics to everyday life.²⁴ In this way the theory of the Spectacle describes the fetishistic nature of capitalist society: all human life is subsumed beneath the social reproduction of capitalist forms that obey a dynamic logic of their own, one which is essentially beyond our conscious control. In such a

¹⁸ ‘Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l’organisation et de l’action de la tendance situationniste internationale’ [1957] (Paris: Éditions Mille et une nuits, 2000).

¹⁹ See Guy Debord, *Œuvres cinématographiques complètes* (Paris: Gaumont, 2008).

²⁰ Situationist International, *La Véritable scission dans l’Internationale* (Paris: Champs Libre, 1972).

²¹ Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* [1993] (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 2001), pp. 21-22.

²² ‘Tout ce qui était directement vécu s’est éloigné dans une représentation’, Guy Debord, *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 766. Henceforth, rather than refer to individual volumes the current work will refer to this collection of his works.

²³ Jappe, *Guy Debord*, pp. 23-24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

world concrete needs and desires are at the mercy of the process of economic production. Debord therefore defines the Spectacle as the negation of life.²⁵ The revolutionary conclusion for Debord is that the economy itself must be abolished.²⁶ This idea distinguishes Debord and the other Situationists from the traditional workers' movement, which, at root, sought only to modernise the economy and to place 'political' controls on it. For Debord, the left is 'spectacular' in this sense. Leftism claims to offer a critique of capitalism but it is essentially only concerned with its reproduction.²⁷ The Spectacle can therefore be thought of as the general pervasiveness of passivity or spectatorship inherent to capitalist social life,²⁸ where even apparent forms of intervention only obey the need to reproduce the economy. For the Situationists it was therefore the role of the proletariat to abolish the economy and its accompanying material forms—the commodity, exchange, culture, work, the state etc.—in order to free humanity from their fetishistic hold. The destruction of the economy would thereby open up the possibility of a conscious and passionate existence beyond abstract economic necessities. It was an idea that would have a major impact on radical theory both within and outside the SI.

It is important to recognise, however, that Debord did not develop the theory of the Spectacle in isolation. It is an idea that emerged over time through the practical activity and theoretical debates that happened within the SI. Raoul Vaneigem would adopt the theory of the Spectacle but equally he had been part of the debate in which

²⁵ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 768.

²⁶ 'S'émanciper des bases matérielles de la vérité inversée, voilà en quoi consiste l'auto-émancipation de notre époque', Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 859.

²⁷ '[L'ex-ouvrier Ebert] se montra bon précurseur de la *représentation* socialiste qui devait peu après s'opposer en ennemi absolu au prolétariat de Russie et d'ailleurs, en formulant l'exact programme de cette nouvelle aliénation: 'Le socialisme veut dire travailler beaucoup'', Debord, *ibid.*, p. 805. The fact that Debord is the author of the now famous piece of graffiti, 'Ne travaillez jamais', scrawled on the walls of the Rue de Seine in Paris in the early 1950s, gives an immediate sense of his absolute opposition to leftism, see *ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁸ 'Il est facile de voir à quel point est attaché à l'aliénation du vieux monde le principe même du spectacle: la non-intervention', *ibid.*, p. 325.

it had been formed. Moreover, at the same time as Debord was in the process of developing the theory of the Spectacle, Vaneigem was himself making essentially the same argument in ‘Banalités de base’ and *Traité*, albeit in slightly different, though complementary, terms. It is crucial therefore to see the critical theories of both men in the context of their decade long relationship that in many ways defined much of what the SI was in this period. Until relatively recently the only easily accessible source of primary information about this relationship was the ‘Communiqué de l’I.S. à propos de Raoul Vaneigem’, a highly critical text written by Guy Debord in the aftermath of Vaneigem’s resignation in 1970. It was later published by Guy Debord in *La Véritable scission dans l’Internationale* and has since served for many as the final word on the subject. With the publication of the correspondence of Guy Debord and a number of comments made by Raoul Vaneigem in recent years, however, it is now possible to develop a more complete picture of this relationship and its trajectory.

The key figure who was to act as an initial point of contact between Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord was Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991). Lefebvre was a French philosopher and sociologist who began his career in the 1920s as a devotee of Surrealism and, in particular, its call for everyday life to be radically transformed into a poetic experience.²⁹ For Lefebvre this goal merged with his interest in the so-called ‘early Marx’, who critiqued capitalism from the point of view of subjective experience as much as from the perspective of material poverty.³⁰ His seminal sociological work, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, which had always ‘séduit’

²⁹ Hussey, *Game of War*, p. 139.

³⁰ The idea of an ‘early’ and ‘mature Marx’ was posited by the orthodox Marxist theorist Louis Althusser. The notion was that there was some kind of intellectual break between the earlier writing of Marx, in particular the ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, and the later work embodied in *Capital*. Althusser’s oversimplification made it easier to reject the earlier writing in order to support the orthodox viewpoint. Embracing the ‘early Marx’ therefore amounted to moving away from the traditional interpretation of Marx originally adopted by the Second and Third Internationals.

Vaneigem,³¹ was a critical examination of the social production of everyday life as the point of departure for a critique of capitalist society at large.

In 1958 Henri Lefebvre, recently expelled from the French Communist Party (PCF) for his opposition to its new hard-line Stalinism, had begun a close friendship with Guy Debord. Both men shared a mutual desire to realise the Surrealist goal of a transformation of everyday life but within a more rigorous, unorthodox Marxian analysis of how such social change was possible. Although he was never a member of the Situationist International, Lefebvre and Debord discussed the problem closely and the former was fascinated by the Situationist notion of merging art and life in *situations*.³² During this time he was also composing *La Somme et le reste*, which described how subjectively experienced ‘moments’ in everyday life exposed everyone to the need and possibility of social transformation.³³

It was after the publication of *La Somme et le reste* in 1960 that Lefebvre was to become the original mediator between Vaneigem and Debord. On the 18th of July 1960 Raoul Vaneigem wrote a letter to Lefebvre, attaching a document entitled ‘Fragments pour une poétique’ and a collection of poems. Apparently no copy of this original document exists but in an interview in 2009 Vaneigem described its contents: ‘je tentais d’unifier formules radicales, langage lettriste, musique, images de films en les créditant candidement de la vertu de colérer le peuple’.³⁴ Vaneigem was attracted to Lefebvre’s critique of the everyday as it spoke to his own experiences of alienation as a teacher of literature at a *lycée* in the small, steel-working town of Nivelles, just

³¹ Raoul Vaneigem, interviewed by Hans Obrist, *Conversation* (Paris: Manuella, 2009), p. 8.

³² Hussey, *Game of War*, p. 140.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³⁴ *Conversation*, p. 8.

south of Brussels.³⁵ Lefebvre was interested enough in the letter addressed to him by Vaneigem to later pass it on to Guy Debord.

Although Lefebvre was important in establishing contact between the two, it does seem as though Vaneigem was already aware of the SI and even in contact with at least one other member of the group before he wrote directly to Debord. The reason for this is that Debord states in his first letter to Vaneigem: 'Peu avant Lefebvre un situationniste de Belgique (Kotányi, peut-être?) nous avait déjà fait noter votre adresse, pour les services de presse de la revue'.³⁶ Vaneigem had probably therefore read some Situationist material before writing to Lefebvre and was known in avant-garde and far-left circles in Brussels.

The strikes that hit Belgium in the Winter of 1960 provided another indirect point of contact between Vaneigem and Debord in the form of Pierre Guillaume (1941-).³⁷ Guillaume was a member of Pouvoir ouvrier (PO) an offshoot of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (SoB), a group of ex-Trotskyists who had moved towards council communism.³⁸ Guy Debord had effectively become a member of the group and originally imagined a merger of PO and the SI.³⁹ SoB argued for workers' self-management, without the mediation of official institutions, as the key to a liberating

³⁵ 'si je n'avais pataugé dans l'ennui quotidien et la dissipation qui l'exorcise, si je n'avais vécu l'écœurement de jours inlassablement répétés et la rage de les foutre en l'air, me serais-je pris de passion pour la *Critique de la vie quotidienne* au point d'écrire à son auteur [...]?' Raoul Vaneigem, *L'État n'est plus rien, soyons tout* (Paris: Rue des Cascades, 2010), p. 35.

³⁶ Guy Debord, letter to Raoul Vaneigem, 31 Jan 1961. For all of the letters by Debord referred to in the current work, see Guy Debord, *Correspondence 1951-1994*, 8 vols (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1999-2010).

³⁷ Pierre Guillaume has had a bizarre and disturbing trajectory since this association. He later emerged as a Holocaust denier and publisher of anti-Semitic literature, see Hussey, *Game of War*, pp. 164-165. Sollers terms him 'a Neo-Nazi anarchist traitor', cited in *ibid.*, p. 164. On this Vaneigem and Debord would no doubt agree with Sollers. Indeed, Vaneigem invokes the inhumanity of the Holocaust in a number of his texts as a historical event. In his examination of the history of heresy he also critiques the anti-Semitism that, he argues, is key to the emergence of Christianity. See in particular the chapter 'Diaspora et Antisémitisme' in Raoul Vaneigem, *La Résistance au christianisme, Les Hérésies des origines au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

³⁸ See *Socialisme ou barbarie, Anthologie* (La Bussière: Acratie, 2007).

³⁹ Such a merger ultimately proved impossible due to the lack of interest of members of PO in the Situationists' concern with the politics of creativity.

revolution. As such, they were highly critical of the role of unions and parties in class struggles. The fact that Hiver '60 was characterised by a reaction against these mediating structures was seen by SoB as a perfect example of theory in practice. The group planned a special edition of its journal on Hiver '60 and, on the 31st of December, Guy Debord asked Pierre Guillaume to meet with Vaneigem on a fact-finding mission about the strikes.⁴⁰

On the 24th of January 1961 Raoul Vaneigem wrote directly to Guy Debord for the first time. In his letter he referred to his appreciation for Debord's 'Préliminaires pour une définition de l'unité du programme révolutionnaire' but also remarked that he could not 'en retrouver le ton ni la résolution dans le n° 5 de *Situationnisme* qui, à mon sens, donne trop dans le 'bulletin intérieur' et pas assez dans l'action violente contre l'idéologie et l'art bourgeois'.⁴¹ Debord replied amicably on the 31st of January, thanking him for his letter and regretting that they could not meet before due to events in Belgium: 'mais tout de même, la grève était mieux'.⁴² He states that Lefebvre had only passed on the manuscript last December but that it had greatly interested him. However, Debord was evidently unimpressed by Vaneigem's verse. He ends the letter by stating that he will soon be visiting Brussels and hopes to meet Vaneigem there.

Debord and Vaneigem became friends as a result of this visit and the latter was made a member of the SI soon after. The correspondence is very sparse on the start of this friendship as it was mostly conducted in person. Vaneigem does, however, devote a few lines to these meetings in the early 1960s, 'nos beuveries dans les bistrots de Beersel', that suggest Hiver '60 was an important context for the

⁴⁰ Laurent Six, *Raoul Vaneigem, l'éloge de la vie affinée* (Belgium: Éditions Luce Wilquin, 2004), pp. 33-34.

⁴¹ Raoul Vaneigem, letter to Guy Debord, 24 January 1961, cited in Debord, *Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. 66.

⁴² Debord, Guy, letter to Raoul Vaneigem, 31 January 1961.

beginning of their partnership.⁴³ The first collaborative efforts centred on the *Internationale situationniste*, the group's journal, to which only members of the SI could contribute.

In the summer of 1961 Vaneigem travelled to Gothenburg with Debord and Attila Kotányi to take part in the Fifth Conference of the SI. Events at the conference confirmed the importance of this new relationship for the group. Vaneigem, Debord, and Kotányi had clearly developed a platform together on which a confrontation with the 'artists' in the SI was to take place. At the start of the meeting Vaneigem took the lead in attempting to resolve this 'art' question.⁴⁴ Kotányi and Debord then followed with their own statements to this effect: the former argued that any art produced by members of the SI be termed 'anti-situationnistes' and the latter claimed to have never made a situationist film.⁴⁵ The majority of the SI agreed with these positions, electing both Vaneigem and Debord to its Central Council.⁴⁶ The success of the conference led to further and closer collaboration between the two. In particular a number of important texts that would help to reorient the SI on a more resolutely 'political' trajectory.⁴⁷

Although this position on art is essentially present in the SI before he joined the group, Vaneigem played a key role here, in collaboration with Debord and Kotányi, in reconstituting it more coherently and forcefully in both theory and practice. Indeed, it was a critical moment that ultimately led to the exclusion of the

⁴³ Raoul Vaneigem, *Le Chevalier, la Dame, le Diable et la mort* [2003] (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 2005), p. 182, 177. See also page 127 of the current work.

⁴⁴ *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962), pp. 26-27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁶ The organisational form of the SI is discussed on pages 165-166 of the current work.

⁴⁷ See Raoul Vaneigem, Guy Debord and Attila Kotányi, 'Sur la Commune' [16 March 1962], *Internationale situationniste*, 12 (Sept 1969), 109-111; see also Guy Debord, 'Les thèses de Hambourg en septembre 1961' in *Internationale situationniste, édition augmentée* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard), pp. 703-704. The 'thèses de Hambourg' were never written down and were instead memorised by the authors; the latter reference is to Debord's account of its contents. These texts and their importance for the later period of the SI are discussed in Chapter 3 of the current work.

‘artists’ from the SI in early 1962 for failing to respond to these demands. Vaneigem and Debord, both now on the Central Council, made the resolution together. Between February 1961 and June 1963 the correspondence that followed between Debord and Vaneigem focuses on the organisation of a new review, *Der Deutsche Gedanke*, to be released by the SI in German to replace that of the excluded artists.⁴⁸ Kotányi was to be responsible for the review, probably due to his German language skills. Vaneigem, however, was named as director because the immigration status of Kotányi put him and his family in danger of being deported by Belgian authorities. Later, Debord asked Vaneigem to take on more responsibility for the review due to the inactivity of Uwe Lausen and Attila Kotányi. The impression this exchange gives is that Debord sees Vaneigem as central to the organisation of activity in the Belgian section of the SI.

The most important communication in this period for the purpose of understanding what Debord thought of Vaneigem occurs in early 1965 when Guy Debord read the manuscript of *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations* for the first time. On the 4th of March 1965 Debord sent a telegram to Vaneigem: ‘MOITIÉ DÉJÀ LU MAGNIFIQUE – STOP – CE QU’IL NOUS FALLAIT – STOP’.⁴⁹ A long letter followed four days later. Debord praised the book effusively: ‘le *Traité* est une réussite, qui va *au-delà* de nos légitimes espérances’, ‘le début de cette lecture (que la suite confirmait) a été pour moi une des plus grandes joies de la période actuelle’.⁵⁰ Debord notes that the book is: ‘très accessible à quelqu’un qui

⁴⁸ Situationist International, *Der Deutsche Gedanke* (Brussels: April 1963). The first and only issue of *Der Deutsche Gedanke* was finally released in April 1963. It contained German translations of key texts from the SI review, including the first German translation of ‘Banalités de base’. The exclusion of Attila Kotányi in 1963 is most likely why there were no further issues.

⁴⁹ Guy Debord, telegram to Raoul Vaneigem, 4 March 1965.

⁵⁰ Guy Debord, letter to Raoul Vaneigem, 8 March 1965.

ignore beaucoup de nos bases’ and ‘En même temps, c’est au plus haut niveau’.⁵¹ Evidently, Debord was immensely pleased with the work that Raoul Vaneigem had achieved in *Traité* and believed it would play a critical role in the communication of Situationist ideas in the coming years. Indeed, he goes on to say that *Traité* marks ‘la fin de la ‘préhistoire de l’I.S.’’.⁵² In other words, *Traité* was a qualitative leap from the Situationist writing that had come before.

As for the contents of the book itself, Guy Debord focuses primarily on how Vaneigem resets the ground for what it would take to transform society and, also, on grasping the ‘subjective’ aspect of the problem:

C’est peut-être la première réapparition, en livre, du *ton*, du niveau de critique, des révolutionnaires dits ‘utopiques’, c’est-à-dire des propositions de base pour le renversement de l’ensemble d’une société: ce qui précède forcément l’organisation pratique, qui s’est appelée assez malencontreusement ‘scientifique’ au siècle dernier.

Je suis particulièrement ravi par la réussite du ton. Tout à fait dans la ligne que tu cherchais. Le passage du subjectif extrême à la théorie, qui n’est plus ‘sereine’. Il y a du Nietzsche, du Fourier, l’héritage légitime de la philosophie, au meilleur sens.⁵³

The historic role that Guy Debord assigns to *Traité* here, the reappearance of utopian revolution, is an important one as it emphasises that Vaneigem attempts to look at the very basis of social being. The issues that Vaneigem raises in *Traité* are about the fundamental building blocks of everyday life in contemporary society and what it would take to bring about a transformation. Arguably, the praise Debord gives Vaneigem here is the reversal of the critique he later aims at traditional Marxism in thesis 95 of *La Société du Spectacle*: Vaneigem has its beneficial aspect, ‘confiance en la démonstration pédagogique qui avait caractérisé le socialisme utopique’, but, more significantly, rediscovered ‘la dimension hégélienne’ and, the reference to

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Fourier in the letter is significant in this respect, 'l'image immobile de la totalité présente dans la critique utopiste (au plus haut degree, chez Fourier)'.⁵⁴

Further, Debord is evidently aware of the difference between his own work, *La Société du Spectacle*, which was not yet complete, and that of Raoul Vaneigem. Where the work of Debord laid emphasis on the categories of social relationships as an objective structure, Vaneigem emphasised the subjective content of these social forms. That Debord refers to Nietzsche is also important, as it shows Debord is aware that the inventor of *la volonté de puissance* is an important influence on how Raoul Vaneigem treats subjectivity in his own work.⁵⁵ Debord is not, however, displeased by these differences between his writing and that of Vaneigem. On the contrary, in this letter Debord sees them as beneficial:

Une autre bonne chose: nos deux ouvrages, traitant évidemment du même problème, confluant dans la même perspective, vont passer sur ce terrain sans se confondre; mais en s'y croisant de nombreuses fois, et se soutenant toujours. Comme des arcs-boutants dans la construction ogivale, en quelque sorte? Coup de chance, tout de même, pour deux textes si peu concertés dans le détail.⁵⁶

The architectural simile used by Debord here obviously suggests that *Traité* and *La Société du Spectacle* are not rival theories but rather, at base, largely the same fundamental theory treated from different angles. Raoul Vaneigem gave a similar comparison of the two works in a recent interview:

⁵⁴ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 804. In thesis 95 of *La Société du Spectacle* Debord defines utopian socialism as pedagogical and Hegelian as well as utopian. The implication is that *Traité* therefore shares these qualities and this is what makes it both original and different, at the very least in terms of degree or intensity, from earlier Situationist writing.

⁵⁵ The relationship between Nietzsche and Vaneigem is discussed in detail on pages 97-98 of the current work.

⁵⁶ Guy Debord, letter to Raoul Vaneigem, 8 March 1965.

La convergence entre *La Société du spectacle* et le *Traité de savoir-vivre* corrobore le fait que se rejoignaient par deux voies différentes l'analyse objective de Debord et la mienne, axée davantage sur la subjectivité.⁵⁷

Vaneigem recognises here that his *Traité* centred more on the 'subjective' aspects of the problem of capitalist society than Debord's book. However, he is also clear that this is a matter of degree, or emphasis, rather than a fundamental difference between the two works. Indeed, the theory of praxis that both Vaneigem and Debord hold to excludes any such unmediated division of object and subject. At the same time, Debord's statement that these texts are 'si peu concertés dans le détail' also supports Vaneigem's assertion that they were 'écrits sans confrontations ni connivences'.⁵⁸ That is to say, Vaneigem and Debord worked separately on their first major books, without a great deal of collaboration in this case. Though obviously both texts emerged out of earlier debates. The completion of *Traité* and *La Société du Spectacle*, not least their eventual publication and influence on May '68, arguably marked the apex of the friendship between Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord.⁵⁹

It is difficult to trace within the historical record exactly how the relationship turned sour in the years that followed. Debord, however, is very clear as to what happened and the reasons why.⁶⁰ For Debord, the years after May '68 were characterised by a dramatic fall in the practical activity of the SI. Fewer and fewer members chose to take part in group decisions and the production of texts. These 'camarades *contemplatifs*', Debord felt, needed to be excluded or change their behaviour in order for the SI to move forward.⁶¹ The French section chose to bring the issue to a head. On the 11th of November 1970 a 'Déclaration' was sent out to the

⁵⁷ Vaneigem, *L'État*, p. 37.

⁵⁸ Vaneigem, *Le Chevalier*, p. 180.

⁵⁹ The influence of these texts on May '68 is discussed in more detail on pages 186-187 of the current work.

⁶⁰ Debord gives his version of events in *La Véritable scission*.

⁶¹ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 1172, 1141.

other sections of the SI.⁶² The text stated that a split was about to take place and implied that any member who disagreed with the move would be excluded.⁶³

Vaneigem did not accept the 'Déclaration' and describes it as 'la dernière abstraction à pouvoir se formuler dans, pour et au nom de l'I.S'.⁶⁴ Moreover, he claims that the confrontation was a signal that the SI had transformed into a simple 'malaise d'être ensemble'.⁶⁵ On the 14th of November 1970 Vaneigem tendered his resignation. In contrast to Debord, he identifies the 'peu de pénétration de la théorie situationniste en milieu ouvrier et du peu de pénétration ouvrière en milieu situationniste' as the primary cause behind the crisis that had gripped the SI.⁶⁶ He also accuses the French section of foul play.⁶⁷ His resignation was definitive and ended his friendship with Debord.

In early December, Debord and René Vienet penned a lengthy response and repudiation of Vaneigem and the accusations he had made in his letter of resignation.⁶⁸ Debord is explicit that Vaneigem had been one of the 'camarades *contemplatifs*' and accuses him of having agreed with everything right up to the point of his resignation.⁶⁹ Debord therefore dismisses his accusation of underhand tactics because, he states, Vaneigem had never raised the issue before.⁷⁰ Further, he disagrees with Vaneigem's notion that the real problem within the SI was the lack of integration with the worker milieu, claiming it amounted to saying that 'aucun des situationnistes

⁶² Ibid., p. 1142.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Raoul Vaneigem, 'Lettre de démission de Raoul Vaneigem' [signed 14 Nov 1970], reprinted in Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 1170. All future references are to this reproduction.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 1170.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Debord, 'Communiqué de l'I.S. à propos de Vaneigem', *Œuvres*, pp. 1171-1184.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 1172.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 1173.

ne travaille dans une usine'.⁷¹ The real problem, Debord argues, was 'sous-participation (quantitative et surtout qualitative)'.⁷²

Debord also attacks the critical perspectives of Raoul Vaneigem. He accuses him of having forgotten dialectical thought and of thinking in a purely idealist manner that excludes all practical considerations of direct action: 'la justice historique, tout autant que l'action réelle dans l'histoire, est étrangère aux préoccupations de Vaneigem'.⁷³ Debord goes on to attack the personal life of Vaneigem, claiming that he was both incapable and strangely timid, a fact he consoled himself with by way of 'un certain nombre de déplaisirs' and 'petites insolences enfantines'.⁷⁴ Worst of all, Debord claims Vaneigem had gone on holiday at the start of May '68, learning of events 'par les *mass media*' and returning only to have missed some of the most decisive moments.⁷⁵ The 'mystique' of Vaneigem, Debord asserts, 'se dégrade en *bluff*'.⁷⁶

Certain critics, Dumontier and Bourseiller for example,⁷⁷ have been content to focus entirely on these highly critical sections of the piece on Vaneigem. What is never cited, however, and perhaps most remarkable is the section where Debord insists on the centrality of the contribution of Raoul Vaneigem to the Situationist International even in the midst of his attack. This passage is worth quoting at length because it provides the best evidence that Raoul Vaneigem was seen as a crucial contributor to the SI by Guy Debord:

Vaneigem a occupé dans l'histoire de l'I.S. une place importante et inoubliable. [...] Vaneigem a apporté à l'I.S. une très remarquable

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 1174.

⁷² Ibid., p. 1172.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 1175.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 1182.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 1182-1183.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 1175.

⁷⁷ Christophe Bourseiller, *Vie et et mort de Guy Debord* [1999] (Paris: PLON, 2002).

contribution: il avait beaucoup d'intelligence et de culture, une grande hardiesse dans les idées, et tout cela était dominée par la plus vraie colère à l'encontre des conditions existantes. Vaneigem avait alors du génie, parce qu'il savait parfaitement aller à l'extrême en tout ce qu'il savait faire. Et tout ce qu'il ne savait pas faire, il n'avait simplement pas encore eu l'occasion de l'affronter personnellement. Il brûlait de commencer. L'I.S. des années 1961-1964, et c'est une période importante pour l'I.S. comme pour les idées de la révolution moderne, a été fortement marquée par Vaneigem, plus peut-être que par tout autre. C'est dans cette période qu'il a non seulement écrit *Traité* et d'autres textes qu'il a signés dans la revue *I.S. (Banalités de base, etc.)* mais aussi participé grandement aux textes collectifs anonymes des numéros 6 à 9 de cette revue, et très créativement à toutes les discussions.⁷⁸

While Debord's 'Communiqué' has in the past served implicitly as a justification for the marginalisation of Raoul Vaneigem, I feel that these comments actually encourage us to place him at the centre of the Situationist story. Debord is not simply attacking Vaneigem. He is being even-handed. The current trend to downgrade Vaneigem as a member of the SI and as a critical theorist has therefore misread not only his work but also the work of Guy Debord. For Debord, the problem with Vaneigem is not the nature of his earlier contribution, but rather, what he sees, in the years after May '68, as a failure to contribute at all. That is to say, even in the late 1970s Debord likes what is said in *Traité*, but does not see it in the behaviour of Vaneigem:

le *Traité de savoir-vivre* est entré dans un courant d'agitation dont on n'a pas fini d'entendre parler, et d'un même mouvement son auteur en est sorti. Il a parlé pour ne pas être. Cependant l'importance de ce livre ne devrait échapper à personne, car personne, pas même Vaneigem, avec le temps, n'aura échappé à ses conclusions.⁷⁹

There is an obvious element of sarcasm in these words but Debord is not saying that the theoretical conclusions of *Traité* are at fault. Rather, Debord claims that Vaneigem, on a personal level, is not up to them. Indeed, in his own critique of Vaneigem, at this time, Debord does not seek to marginalise him. He makes him the

⁷⁸ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 1175.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 1181.

subject of one of the lengthiest texts on a resignation or exclusion in the record and, even amidst his criticism, he does not dismiss the contribution of Raoul Vaneigem but instead suggests it is absolutely key to understanding the direction the SI took in its later period. The marginalisation of Raoul Vaneigem from the critical reception of the SI is therefore in response to how that reception has been shaped in the decades after the dissolution of the group rather than an accurate representation of how members of the organisation understood their own history at the time. In other words, it is Debord himself who tells us that his comrade ‘avait alors du génie’ and that the SI, between 1961-1964, ‘a été fortement marquée par Vaneigem, plus, peut-être que par tout autre’.⁸⁰ It is the aim of the current work to explain exactly how Vaneigem is important in these respects.

The critique that Debord developed of Raoul Vaneigem, however, did not end in December 1970. Debord in part helped to shape the negative external perception of Raoul Vaneigem through the publication of *La Véritable Scission dans l'Internationale* in 1972, the book that dissolved the SI. It contained his critique of Vaneigem from December 1970 and added further personal attacks of the same sort.⁸¹ Moreover, Debord had the publishing connections to put forward his version of events, commissioning, for example, some of the first histories of the SI: Jean-François Martos (1989) and Pascal Dumontier (1990).⁸² These texts tended to focus

⁸⁰ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 1175.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1142-1143.

⁸² See Jean-François Martos, *Histoire de l'Internationale Situationniste* [1989] (Paris: Ivrea, 1995); Dumontier, *op. cit.* After the SI Guy Debord formed a close friendship with French media entrepreneur Gérard Lebovici. Lebovici became a patron of sorts to Guy Debord. He published his works as part of the Champs Libre publishing house and gave Debord a strong hand in the company. At one time he also ran a cinema, Studio Cujas, that played only Guy Debord's films repeatedly throughout the day. This was meant as a kind of ‘potlatch’ that acted as a parody of the pornographic films shown on repeat throughout Paris at this time.

only on the negative aspects of Debord's account of Vaneigem who in turn increasingly occupied a merely anecdotal presence in Situationist history.

In his future correspondence with others Debord would treat Vaneigem with scorn, referring to him derogatively as 'Ratgeb'.⁸³ Debord is from this point on the inveterate enemy of Vaneigem and his letters in this later period contain numerous insulting remarks about his erstwhile comrade. Vaneigem is 'le chien le plus fidèle [...] qui n'ose jamais gronder' and a conformist, 'bon fils, bon conscrit, bon professeur, bon mari'.⁸⁴ More importantly, the letters of Debord, in this period after the dissolution of the SI, dismiss the post-Situationist work of Raoul Vaneigem. In 1971, for example, Vaneigem published a text critiquing the manner in which a strike took place in Kiruna, Sweden.⁸⁵ Debord states that he has no respect for 'la pensée, et le bluff, de Vaneigem' and claims that he has adopted 'ce ton supérieur d'un intellectuel touriste qui donne des leçons aux ouvriers'.⁸⁶ That same year his critique extended to problems with Vaneigem's critical perspective:

il [Vaneigem] mettait trop l'accent sur le côté *personnel*, dans les luttes qui allaient recommencer et, dans ce côté personnel même, bien trop l'accent sur le pur *sollen*, et donc même vite sur le bluff qui est le contraire de l'illusion: l'illusionnisme délibéré.⁸⁷

In contrast to his position in 1967, Debord now opposes his own apparently more impersonal considerations against the emphasis on personal subjectivity of Vaneigem in a negative light. Here Debord starts to distance himself intellectually from

⁸³ Jörg Ratgeb (1480-1526) was a German radical and painter of the Renaissance. Vaneigem adopted the pseudonym 'Ratgeb' for the publication of *De la grève sauvage à l'autogestion généralisée* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1974). For an example of Debord using the term scornfully to refer to Vaneigem see Guy Debord, letter to Jacques Le Glou, 6 May 1974.

⁸⁴ Guy Debord, letter to Paolo Salvadori, 30 November 1979. The contents of this letter are discussed in more detail below.

⁸⁵ Guy Debord, letter to J. V. Martin, 14 April 1971. From this letter it is clear that J. V. Martin said Vaneigem's text was not received as an insult by workers there. The author of the current work has been unable to track down the document by Vaneigem in question.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Guy Debord, letter to Juvenal Quillet, 11 November 1971.

Vaneigem. This stance increases as Vaneigem also begins to develop his own intellectual positions away from Debord in new publications:

Il est maintenant redevenu *pro-situ*. Il dit qu'il approuve toujours 'le projet situationniste'. Quant à l'I.S., il n'a plus pour elle, depuis novembre 1970, que de 'l'indifférence'! Et son texte est un véritable *pastiche* du style Vaneigem, dans une perspective théorique qui apparaît bien clairement *décomposée*.⁸⁸

Debord was also a reader of the later work of Raoul Vaneigem. On the publication of *Le Livre des plaisirs* in 1979, Debord wrote to Paolo Salvadori with a long critique of the book and of Raoul Vaneigem.⁸⁹ He notes that the first positive review of the book was from the Right and finds the text laughable. For Debord, Vaneigem has lost all negativity in his work and posits only the positivity of the commodity economy:

sa conception du gratuit ne s'oppose à la marchandise que par lointain souvenir de sa jeunesse. En fait, il s'oppose, avec une terreur bien compréhensible, à tout jugement de valeur sur quelqu'un ou sur quelque chose, comme au dialogue ou à la moindre réciprocité. Et ce monde du 'gratuit', au sens néo-vaneigemiste, est justement le pur monde de la marchandise moderne, qu'il a rallié quoique sans faire fortune : *il n'y a pas de choix, et rien ne vaut rien*. De sorte qu'en effet, aucun spectateur ne juge plus, ni un restaurant, ni un livre, ni la mort de Baader ni celle de Moro.⁹⁰

For Debord the move of Vaneigem away from the Marxian language of *Traité* to the more Reichian discourse of *Le Livre des plaisirs* marks a decomposition of the critical style of his old comrade. As we shall see in chapter 4 of the current work, however, it is clear that Debord is wrong to see this discussion of gratuity as a rejection of all judgement. On the contrary, it is meant as a point from which to judge for oneself. Perhaps, what is most significant about this passage is that it is Debord who was to

⁸⁸ Guy Debord, letter to Gianfranco Sanguinetti, 20 March 1972.

⁸⁹ Guy Debord, letter to Paolo Salvadori, 30 November 1979.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

develop a language of ‘vaneigemisme’, ‘néo-vaneigemiste’ and the ‘vaneigemistes’.⁹¹ These terms developed by Debord are meant to make the *later* work of Raoul Vaneigem appear as ideology and, perhaps, also meant as an implicit contrast with a ‘Debordism’ that the author himself would never acknowledge. It is Debord who has created the notion of an *intellectual* confrontation between himself and Vaneigem more so than the critics. Given that Debord had so much influence on the early reception of the SI, both through his many international contacts and his publishing connections, it is no surprise that many of the negative portrayals of Vaneigem, as well as the interpretation of this relationship, in the critical literature reflect the views of Guy Debord. However, his critique only applied to the later work. The fact that it has since been projected onto our understanding of their entire relationship, including the 1960s, is rather the fault of critics misreading what Debord actually says on the matter.

A Critical Survey

Regardless of how he might have viewed his posthumous recognition, the status of Guy Debord as a major French thinker has made it difficult for those who worked with him, and who were arguably his intellectual equals, to emerge out of his shadow. Most critical works written about the Situationists have focused exclusively on Guy Debord and the French context, side-lining the role of his European partners such as Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005), Asger Jorn (1914-1973) and, of course, Raoul Vaneigem.⁹² These figures are mainly considered in relation to Debord and are rarely

⁹¹ See Guy Debord, letter to Eduardo Rothe, 8 May 1974; letter to Paolo Salvadori, 30 November 1979; letter to Juvenal Quillet, 11 November 1971.

⁹² Constant Nieuwenhuys was a key contributor to the foundation of the Situationist International and has been called ‘one of the major visionary architects’ of the twentieth century, Bartomé Mari in

understood to have contributed anything essential to the Situationist story. There are a number of points, however, that suggest this should not be the case. Constant, for example, may have invented the term ‘situationniste’,⁹³ and Asger Jorn’s work on value-form and gender were singular additions to the Situationist project in its early years.⁹⁴

A survey of the extant literature on the Situationist International supports the view that, despite being a constant presence, the contribution of Raoul Vaneigem to the organisation has largely been considered only in relation to the life and work of Guy Debord. Raoul Vaneigem has never been the focus of rigorous, critical analysis and embodies an extensive gap in our knowledge of the Situationist International. For some the contribution of Raoul Vaneigem is essential, for others his work excites polemical attacks that are far less even-handed than those developed by Guy Debord. Where his contribution is discussed, his own critical theory is often subsumed within that of Debord or reduced to the development of the concept of *la vie quotidienne*. An overview of the critical field highlights the problematic marginalisation of Raoul Vaneigem and the misunderstandings his work has suffered as a result.

Wigley Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon, The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (Amsterdam: OIO, 1998). Constant was originally a member of CoBrA and formed a close working partnership with Guy Debord in the mid-to-late 1950s. Much like Debord, ‘Constant rejects any distinction between design and desire, architecture and psychology, space and social life’, Wigley, p. 14.

His major contribution was the design for a city based on Situationist ideas, *New Babylon*. The city was designed to aid the free construction of situations and the incessant transformation of everyday life. In this way art would be surpassed and replaced with play. Constant later resigned from the SI in June 1960 after disagreements with Debord over the exclusion of members of the Dutch section. For an extensive examination of Constant, see Wigley, op. cit. For a collection of Constant’s contributions to the SI, see Constant Nieuwenhuys, *New Babylon, Constant, Art et Utopie, Textes Situationnistes* (Paris: Cercle, 1997).

Asger Jorn, a Danish painter and also a member of the CoBrA artistic avant-garde group, was a life-long friend and collaborator of Guy Debord. He was a founding member of the SI and resigned in 1962 after the exclusion of the artists. He continued to have association with the SI, however, and to help fund its projects.

⁹³ Hussey, *Game of War*, pp. 105-106.

⁹⁴ See Asger Jorn, *Critique de l'économie politique* (Paris: 1960); *La genèse naturelle: sur la situation singulière qu'occupent dans l'humanité les males* (Paris: Allia, 2001). There has been little research on these more theoretical aspects of the work of Asger Jorn and they remain largely out of print.

In order to contextualise how Raoul Vaneigem has been received in the more recent literature on the SI, it is important to consider how he was originally perceived in the 1960s. The critical reception of Raoul Vaneigem by a wider public began with the publication of *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* by Éditions Gallimard in 1967. The context in which *Traité* was released is crucial as it was the notoriety the Situationists had earned as a result of the Strasbourg Scandal that created enough public interest to get the book such a prestigious publisher. In 1966 several students of the University of Strasbourg approached the SI after six of their number were elected to the student union by an anti-bureaucratic and disinterested base. Not sure what to do with this unexpected state of affairs, the students asked the SI to help them work out what the most subversive course of action could be in this situation. The Situationists immediately suggested that the union's funds be used to publish a critique of the university milieu: *De la misère en milieu étudiant*. In the run up to the text's publication, students threw tomatoes at Professor Abraham Moles during his inaugural class. A subversive advertising poster followed: 'Le retour de la colonne Durruti'. The text was finally distributed to, among others, university notables during the *rentrée* and the elected students called for a vote on the immediate dissolution of their own bureau. The whole event was immediately taken up by the international press.⁹⁵ Equally important was the coordinated publication of Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle* by Buchet-Chastel in the winter of 1967. Both books were reviewed side by side as representative of the Situationists, who were in turn associated with the provo movement and the radical wings of the student movement. Such was the interest in the SI that the books had lengthy reviews in the French national media.

⁹⁵ For the Situationists account of these events, see 'Nos buts et nos méthodes dans le scandale de Strasbourg' in *Internationale situationniste*, 11 (Oct 1967), pp. 23-31.

Historians of the SI have previously overlooked a review of *Traité* and *La Société du Spectacle* that took place on *Le Masque et la plume*, a literary radio programme on France Inter that was hosted by François-Régis Bastide in front of a live studio audience.⁹⁶ On the panel were four literary critics that included Robert Kanters and Pierre-Henri Simon. Kanters had already written a review of the books for *Le Figaro Littéraire* and Simon was to write one several weeks later for *Le Monde*, both discussed below. Perhaps surprisingly, it is not *La Société du Spectacle* but rather *Traité* that was given the focus of discussion on the programme. What is also striking is that the Situationists' critique is given far greater praise and historical significance than it was given in the written reviews.

Vaneigem is described variously as 'un écrivain très remarquable', 'un penseur', 'un philosophe', who writes 'des choses très belles, très utiles et très intéressantes' and whose writing embodies 'une pensée riche, complexe, virulente'; at one point he is even compared to the young Marx by age (as though *Traité* were the preface to a *Capital* that was to come at a later date).⁹⁷ Further, Vaneigem receives much attention as an *homme de lettres*: 'c'est un homme qui écrit brillamment' with a 'violence polémique et destructrice' and a 'brio des formules'.⁹⁸ It is worth noting that almost nothing is said of Guy Debord in these respects, which suggests *Traité* was seen at the time to be a remarkable achievement of style, if not always content.

The arguments put forward by the SI are treated with some confusion by Bastide who describes *Traité* as a 'genre du négativisme absolu' and is in turn interrupted, presumably by Kanters, to be told the Situationists are in fact 'des provos

⁹⁶ France Inter, *Le Masque et la plume*, 14 January 1968. As a sign of the times, the audience contained two 'Dadaïstes de Nanterre' who interject and are the subject of amused, slight mocking from the panel. To my knowledge the current work is the first to have uncovered this radio broadcast on the Situationists in the 1960s.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

qui pensent'.⁹⁹ The reviewers proceed to explain the critical theory of the Situationists, as presented in *Traité* and *Spectacle*, and touch on a number of important points. It is noted that Vaneigem is clearly influenced by Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, but also by Dada, Surrealism and the young Marx. The reviewers cite the totalising nature of Situationist critique, which is described as 'très intelligente et très efficace'.¹⁰⁰ Commensurately, the fact that the Situationists were attempting to think beyond contemporary political divisions is highlighted. The weakest aspect of the writing of Vaneigem in *Traité* is identified as the final section of the book that sets out the positivity of the Situationist project, the conception of a radically different society beyond capitalism. Moreover, the commentators baulk at the notion of abolishing philosophy, one member of the panel claiming, erroneously, that this is not an aim of the Situationists. Once the discussion is briefly opened up to the floor, a member of the audience states that he thought the Situationists were concerned with resolving the problem of human suffering: 'Le situationniste a trouvé un moyen, et je crois que c'est un moyen qui se défend de toute manière, puisque, la théorie en elle-même se défend'.¹⁰¹ That Raoul Vaneigem was being discussed in these terms on a national level, and not only by the media but also members of the public is not something that features in histories of the SI. In fact, it gives weight to anecdotal evidence elsewhere that *Traité* was possibly more influential during May '68 than *Spectacle*.

Jean-Michel Mension, for example, a friend of Debord in the 1950s and later a Parisian *soixante-huitard*, suggests that Raoul Vaneigem was the most widely read of the Situationists during the Movement of Occupations:

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

I am even convinced that Vaneigem was better known [to the kids of May '68] than Guy, no doubt because there were ideas in Vaneigem that had an appeal for some of them, which was not true of Debord. Debord was simply unfathomable, and they didn't understand a word.¹⁰²

These statements by Mension are also reflected in the account of Patrick Negroni who claims Vaneigem had far more influence on the younger members of the SI and the hangers-on after May '68 than Guy Debord:

Debord n'était pas un personnage central au niveau des relations. La démarche était collective, presque générationnelle. Vaneigem avait autant d'influence, si ce n'est plus, sur les jeunes.¹⁰³

Taken together, this evidence strongly suggests that the ideas of Raoul Vaneigem had at least as much, if not more, influence on the world exterior to the SI as Guy Debord. As such, his later marginalisation comes into much sharper relief against the backdrop of this moment when Situationist ideas were actually being adopted by a mass social movement. It demonstrates that the fact that Vaneigem has fallen into the shadows of Guy Debord in the critical reception of the Situationist International was by no means inevitable but is a more recent development.

Through the course of the winter of 1967-1968 *Traité* and *Spectacle* were reviewed together within the national press. Robert Kanters, in *Le Figaro Littéraire*, is doubtful that the Situationists would constitute an important intellectual or political movement as Existentialism and Surrealism had previously.¹⁰⁴ On the part of Vaneigem he notes a nostalgia for feudal society and contrasts this with Debord who places his confidence in workers' councils. Moreover, Kanters says that the hostility of Vaneigem towards cybernetics is ineffective but his iconoclasm against a society of

¹⁰² Jean-Michel Mension, trans. Donald-Nicholson Smith, *The Tribe* [1998] (San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2001), pp. 123-124.

¹⁰³ Cited in Bourseiller, p. 399.

¹⁰⁴ Kanters, Robert, 'Des Iconoclastes parmi nous', *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 25 Dec 1967.

images is well justified. In his conclusion Kanter argues that the SI should be understood as a kind of modern apocalyptic religious group: ‘semblable aux sectes idéologiques des derniers temps du monde antique ou groupes hérétiques du Moyen Âge chrétien auxquels l’auteur du *Traité de savoir-vivre* pense souvent’.¹⁰⁵

In *Le Nouvel Observateur*, François Châtelet describes the books as ‘bibles terroristes’ alongside images of provos, the nineteenth-century anarcho-terrorist Ravachol and the French illegalist Bonnot.¹⁰⁶ Other critics had already offered faint praise for the SI but Châtelet is absolutely hostile towards the Situationists, calling them writers only in the most ‘banal’ sense of the term and seeing them as a symptom of the times, whose theories embodied a reactionary and purely abstract negation.¹⁰⁷ *Spectacle* is described as drier and more dogmatic than *Traité*, which he claims is more literary and nuanced.¹⁰⁸ This is perhaps a surprising comment to find given that today Debord is often considered the more subtle and literary writer of the two. Indeed, it would appear that the quality of Debord’s writing seems to have completely escaped the reviewer. Châtelet sums up his estimation of the Situationists in general as pure nonsense that is itself the product of the Spectacle and he concludes by stating that ‘situationnisme’ is ‘sans concept’.¹⁰⁹

Pierre-Henri Simon (1968) in *Le Monde* develops an extremely reactionary critique of the Situationists: ‘il faut garder quelque sentiment de la nature sociale de l’homme, et ne pas voir le mal en soi dans ‘l’organisation sociale hiérarchisée’’.¹¹⁰ As such Simon places himself in absolute opposition to any idea of a society without a state, regardless of the specific arguments put forward by the SI: ‘comme si la

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ François Châtelet, ‘La dernière internationale’, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 3 January 1968, pp. 28-29.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Pierre-Henri Simon, ‘“Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations”, de Raoul Vaneigem, ‘La Société du Spectacle’, de Guy Debord’, *Le Monde*, 14 February 1968.

soumission du faible au fort n'était pas plus à craindre dans l'absence des lois'.¹¹¹ Indeed, Simon evokes a number of traditional conservative positions: the fear of dying of hunger without consumer society, the inevitability of the emergence of a state and the necessity of technocratic means for organising distribution. Simon, therefore, offers a straightforward liberal critique of the Situationists, reserving particular disdain for Vaneigem who, he claims, 'patauge dans les sottises dont il est juste de dire que Debord se garde beaucoup mieux'.¹¹²

In summary, the critical reception of Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord in the late 1960s held no hint that either one would later come to dominate all discussion of the Situationist International. Both figures were treated fairly equally and, at times, Vaneigem was considered of much greater critical interest and influence than Guy Debord. Whether such opinions were justified is not the argument at stake here, but rather the fact that our current notions of what is important about the SI developed many years after 1968. Moreover, at the time, both figures were read side by side as the avatars of a unified Situationist project.

The 1970s were, properly speaking, the period in which the primary material on the SI would be produced for wider consumption. In 1974 Christopher Gray, an ex-member of the English section of the SI, published a translation of selected texts from the SI review and in 1975 Debord released the first anthology of *Internationale situationniste*. Since the publication of *Traité* and *Spectacle* in 1967, as well as May '68, Situationist texts had made inroads into the campuses and underground scene in the United States. Vaneigem was known to English-speaking audiences through a number of editions. In 1966 'Banalités' was translated by Christopher Gray under the

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

title *Totality for Kids*. In 1972 *Traité* was translated by John Fullerton and Paul Sieveking as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.

Unlike in France, these texts were not distributed by large publishers and excited no official critical attention. *Traité* therefore knew a largely underground existence in the US. On the level of relationships, Vaneigem had far more influence in the US than Guy Debord. Vaneigem had travelled to the US in 1966 precisely in an attempt to expand Situationist interests there and he was in regular correspondence with the American members of the SI.¹¹³ After the dissolution of the SI in 1972 a number of Situationist-inspired groups developed in the US: in New York, Diversion, by John Horelick, and Create Situations, by Tony Verlaan (both ex-members of the SI); in Berkeley, Contradictions, Perspectives and the Council for the Eruption of the Marvellous, with much infighting over who was the legitimate inheritor of the SI.¹¹⁴

A final important factor in the future critical reception of the Situationists was the cultural continuation of certain of their ideas in the punk movement and the British New Wave music scene. Malcolm McLaren (1946-2010), manager of the Sex Pistols, and Tony Wilson (1950-2007), founder of Factory Records in Manchester, were avid readers of Situationist literature and encouraged its application, albeit superficially, in the musical practices of their associates. Equally, the old English section of the SI, based in London, produced a journal, *King Mob*, which acted as the organ for Situationist ideas in the UK.

¹¹³ On the most practical level one reason for his links with the US was that he probably spoke better English than Debord.

¹¹⁴ Ken Knabb, a member of Contradiction, would also produce American translations of selected articles from *Internationale situationniste* published in 1981. The first extensive critical text on the SI produced after its dissolution was by Jacobs and Winks in 1975, both members of Perspectives. Jacobs argued that the dissolution of the Situationist International had not been the glorious act of self-determination it was portrayed to be, but rather an embarrassment. The SI, he argued, should have disbanded in 1969 as the revolutionary movement had moved beyond Situationist theses. See David Jacobs and Christopher Winks, *At Dusk: The Situationist Movement in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, CA: Perspectives, 1975).

The 1980s saw the development of a more extensive critical reception of the Situationist International. This was made possible due to the availability of more easily accessible material in English and French needed for primary research. In 1977 Bandini published a study in Italian on the notion of political aesthetics between CoBrA and the SI.¹¹⁵ His study focused on the period preceding the foundation of the Situationist International and, for this reason, Vaneigem is not an important presence. In Holland, René Sanders did a series of programmes on national radio about the Situationists for which he interviewed Dutch ex-members: Constant, Armando and Jacqueline de Jong.¹¹⁶ *Spectacle* was first published in Dutch in 1976 and *Traité* followed in 1978. In 1987 Sanders completed a thesis on the Situationists in Dutch, which remains unpublished. He was particularly taken with Debord and saw his critical theory behind many cultural and philosophical developments after the 1960s.

In France, Bertrand published the first critical examination of Situationist ideas that focused primarily on the work of Guy Debord.¹¹⁷ Bertrand was interested in the Situationists from the perspective of the abolition of art and understood Debord to be the key figure in the development of these positions within the SI. Also in France, Martos produced the first history of the Situationist International. Hussey describes this book as ‘an orthodox and Debord-controlled history of the SI’.¹¹⁸ Indeed, there is no evidence that Martos spoke to anyone other than Debord or those of his circle in the writing of the book. Though he provides a short summary of ‘Banalités de base’, Martos passes quickly over *Traité* and focuses on *Spectacle*, repeating the oft-echoed opposition between the two works: ‘Là où Vaneigem part de l’homme, du subjectif,

¹¹⁵ Mirella Bandini, *L’Esthétique, la politique, De Cobra à l’Internationale Situationniste, 1948-1957* [1977] (Arles: Sulliver, 1998)

¹¹⁶ See interview with Sanders in ‘Situationisme bestaat niet’ in *Kunst en Theorie* (1999), reproduced in *Siebethissen.net*, web accessed 14 June 2012.

¹¹⁷ See Olivier Bertrand, *Aux origines du dépassement révolutionnaire de l’art: Guy Debord et la construction des situations* (Paris: IEP, 1982).

¹¹⁸ Hussey, *Game of War*, p. 265.

Debord énonce sa critique du spectacle du froid point de vue de l'histoire'.¹¹⁹ Similarly, another highly Debordian history of the SI was published by Pascal Dumontier in 1990. Despite marking *Banalités* as the start of the later period of the SI, Dumontier also used only *La Véritable Scission* for his historical account of Vaneigem.

In 1984 accusations were made against Guy Debord over the assassination of his friend Gérard Lebovici. Henceforth Debord earned a reputation as a mysterious and secretive figure on the fringes of Parisian society. Debord traces the development of his notoriety in the French press in a book entitled *Cette Mauvaise Réputation* (1993). Increasingly, Debord developed public recognition as a figure of interest in his own right; that is to say, not only associated with his place in the SI.

By far the most influential critical text on the SI from this period was *Lipstick Traces* published by Greil Marcus in 1989.¹²⁰ Marcus was concerned with tracing the cultural roots of the Sex Pistols through the history of the Parisian avant-garde. As his focus was primarily cultural, his work turns mostly on the early period of the Situationist International, as well as the movements from which it emerged: Dada, Surrealism and Lettrism. Vaneigem actually features very little in the work of Marcus, no doubt because he did not take part in this earlier 'artistic' phase of the SI and was more important to the development of the later 'political' period that led up to May '68. Even so, Vaneigem is described by Marcus as a kind of prophet of May '68, who 'was writing a how-to manual on revolution in modern society'.¹²¹ Speaking of *Traité*, Marcus notes that its 'lines [...] would be copied on to the walls of Paris,

¹¹⁹ Martos, p. 989.

¹²⁰ See Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces, A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* [1989] (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 239.

then across France, and then [...] around the world'.¹²² In summary, by the time of *Lipstick Traces* the Situationists had come to be seen primarily through a cultural lens and Debord had become the dominant figure in the international reception of the organisation, with Vaneigem an increasingly marginal one.

The 1990s were arguably the most important period in which the contemporary reception of the Situationists was shaped. The early nineties saw the publication of two ideas-driven studies, Plant in the US and Jappe in Italy.¹²³ Plant reads Debord and Vaneigem on a relatively equal basis though remarking on the different approaches of the two authors.¹²⁴ As with earlier contrasts made between the two authors, there is the implication that where Debord develops an objective analysis, Vaneigem is more of a lyrical revolutionary for whom reality as it actually stands is of little concern. At the same time, there is a sense that *Traité* provides a more obviously subjective element that is perhaps lacking in *Spectacle*:

Vaneigem's radical subject negates the seductive glamour of the spectacle with demands for active participation; it responds to the mediations of spectacular life with forms of immediate communication and direct control; it challenges the spectacle's claim to circumscribe reality with actions and gestures which allow for forms of self-realisation in another, broader, chosen context.¹²⁵

Plant is right in her description of the general thrust of *Traité*, however, her use of terminology such as the 'radical subject' is never backed up by the kind of theoretical exposition needed to understand the specificity of such language in Vaneigem. For

¹²² Ibid., p. 239. Marcus notes here that a person in his town has a bumper sticker that reads 'Act locally, think globally', a phrase written by Vaneigem but "the person who bought the sticker will never know", *ibid.*

¹²³ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture, The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹²⁴ 'Debord's primary concern was with the internal contradictions of spectacular society [...] but [...] Vaneigem had few qualms about making attractive, inspiring, and sometimes unsupported claims on behalf of the radical subjectivity he saw rising against the spectacle at every turn', *ibid.*, p. 38.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 38.

Plant the radical subject is simply a general abstraction used to designate the emphasis placed on subjectivity in *Traité* and not a specific term in the detailed development of the Marxian notion of praxis Vaneigem actually lays out in his work. Although Plant explores the notions of everyday, revolution as festival, play and spontaneity in Vaneigem's writing, these ideas are not presented as though situated within a coherent intellectual framework. Rather, they appear as largely discursive forms of literary practice. The primary reason for this is that the methodology of Plant was firmly rooted in Postmodernism. Plant is not concerned with 'objectively' developing a definition of these ideas from within the texts themselves. Instead, her work seeks to situate *Traité* and *Spectacle* as forerunners to Postmodernism, in particular to Baudrillard. As a result any exposition of the actual critical theory of Raoul Vaneigem gives way in her study to a very different discourse than that for which his ideas were originally intended.

The most important critical text of the early 1990s, and for the field as a whole, was written by the German-born critic Anselm Jappe in Italian in 1993. Jappe was the first to focus a study on Guy Debord exclusively. Methodologically speaking, Jappe is also highly innovative. He provides an intellectual biography on the work of Guy Debord that clarifies his key ideas through a systematic analysis and exposition of his critical theory. Most importantly, Jappe grasps that these theories could only be properly understood in relation to his appropriation of the theory of praxis from Lukács.¹²⁶ Indeed, Jappe is hostile to approaches to Debord that examine aspects of his critical thinking in isolation—focusing on *la vie quotidienne* or the critique of the

¹²⁶ György Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness* (1920), was the first Marxist theorist to see the theory of praxis as essential to understanding Marx. Lukács argued that capitalism had to be understood as a totality where the consciousness of subjects was 'reified' (social forms seem wholly objective and trans-historical). The proletariat, he posited, were the first social class capable of developing a consciousness of these reified social relations and, therefore, able to abolish them. Lukács therefore reintroduced the possibility of human agency into revolution, where traditional Marxism had understood communist society to be the inevitable outcome of natural laws beyond human control.

media—and stresses that his thought is aimed at capitalist society as a totality.¹²⁷

Jappe therefore adopts a particularly suitable methodology for examining the work of the Situationists by providing insight into their theories based on their own terms. In this sense his study is far more ‘objective’ than more ideological approaches, such as that attempted by Plant, or cultural ones, such as the PhD of Bacigalupi completed in 1993 that reiterated the Situationist heritage of punk and neo-Expressionism.¹²⁸

Jappe, however, in his focus on Debord is dismissive of Vaneigem and his reading is clearly coloured by *La Véritable Scission*. Vaneigem features only as an anecdotal presence in his study, far less, for example, than in Plant, and his work is dismissed as mysticism in a footnote:

Dans le *Traité* de Vaneigem, on peut effectivement déceler le désir d’une totale correspondance entre soi et le monde, qui semble parfois confiner au mysticisme – tendance apparue à diverses reprises dans les rangs des lettristes et des situationnistes.¹²⁹

As I argue in chapters 1 and 5 of the current work, this accusation is erroneous as Vaneigem makes it very clear that the relationship between subject and object is a

¹²⁷ ‘Totality’ is a key category of thought that Marx adopts from Hegel. In the philosophy of Hegel, totality [*Totalität*] ‘stresses [...] the completeness of the whole, that nothing is left out’, Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 310. In contrast to the ‘whole’ [*das Ganze*], which can be a fragment and therefore part of a larger whole, a totality cannot be part of a larger totality, *ibid.* For Hegel, ‘Each part of such a totality is itself the whole’, *ibid.* Crucially, Hegel applied the category of totality to the whole of historical society, which he saw as a self-developing system, see Felton Shorthall, *The Incomplete Marx* (England: Avebury, 1994), pp. 90-93.

Marx embraces the notion of society and, indeed, ‘reality’ as a totality, Shortall, *ibid.*, p. 93. But where Hegel posits an immediate, rational system, Marx sees the mediation of human praxis (see above) and therefore the mediating social relationships that make up this total reality because praxis does not occur in isolation, *ibid.*, pp. 98-100. For this reason, Marx sees no fundamentally meaningful distinction between the different schools of thought – economics, history, philosophy, art etc. – rather, these are all abstractions from the whole, *ibid.*, p. 84. Equally, as was suggested above, there is no distinction for Marx between the different realms of philosophy such as ontology and epistemology. Moreover, each of these fragments of the totality, including their fragmentary nature, is a reflection of the society as a whole. A society, in the case of capitalism, divided into social classes, roles containing real individuals performing conscious material practices (including philosophers, historians and economists). These practices can only be understood ‘concretely’ once considered as expressions of the totality of which they are a part.

¹²⁸ See Donald Bacigalupi, ‘Pretty Vacant, Neo-Expressionist Painting, Situationist Theory and Punk Rock’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 1993).

¹²⁹ Jappe, *Guy Debord*, p. 243.

mediated one. The references to mysticism are always of a poetic quality that is a metaphorical way of conveying the unity of subject and object in mediation. Notwithstanding, the methodological approach of Jappe towards Guy Debord, which could be termed intellectual biography, combining insights about his life and theory, is well suited to the subject.

In 1994 the suicide of Guy Debord became an event that would define the critical reception of the Situationists in later years. The legacy of Debord became a heated subject in the national media and a large number of biographies emerged in quick succession.¹³⁰ Many of these texts are now the major secondary sources on the Situationists in the critical field; in particular, Bourseiller, Kaufmann and Hussey. Where previous studies, save for Jappe, had tended to examine the Situationists as a whole, it became standard to focus primarily on Guy Debord and the French context.¹³¹

In Bourseiller, a work that has a tendency to diminish the ‘political’ aspects of the SI in favour of its earlier ‘artistic’ period, Vaneigem is very much an anecdotal presence who appears in the story of Debord with little explanation of the relationship. Bourseiller notes that ‘Banalités’ is an important text that embodies ‘une bonne photographie de la pensée situationniste en 1962’.¹³² Strangely he emphasises a contrast between the direction of Debord and Vaneigem and *SoB*: ‘Tandis que la tendance regroupée autour de Cornelius Castoriades entame [...] une révision radicale

¹³⁰ Beyond the critical texts the suicide of Debord was something of a media event with obituaries in the major newspapers. In 1996 Paris FM 93.5 broadcast a documentary in four episodes about Debord, including interviews with those who knew him, that was over five hours long. See *Nuits Magnétiques: L’Internationale situationniste* (London: Chronos Publications), 4 Cassettes.

¹³¹ There are many obvious reasons and advantages for critics in focusing on Guy Debord. It is a fact that Guy Debord was the driving force behind much of what the SI was. He, more than any other, contributed the original impetus and key texts. He was a member of the original Lettrist group around Isidore Isou. His life and work incorporate the entire evolution of the Situationist International, from the LI and the SI’s early and later periods, until its dissolution. There is no doubt that Guy Debord is absolutely central to our understanding of the SI and the radical history of the twentieth century.

¹³² Bourseiller, p. 247.

du marxisme, Debord et Vaneigem élaborent une critique de la vie quotidienne'.¹³³ Bourseiller therefore ignores that 'Banalités' was actually the text in which Vaneigem most clearly states the Situationist position on praxis and therefore its total opposition to orthodox Marxism. Moreover, this text has very little to say about *la vie quotidienne*.

Hussey calls the break with Vaneigem 'the most crucial point in the slow break-up of the SI'.¹³⁴ For Hussey, 'Vaneigem was also a threat to Debord and one of the few remaining Situationists who could intellectually match Debord step for step'.¹³⁵ Hussey also notes the fact that *Traité* was arguably more popular than *Spectacle*.¹³⁶ Despite keeping Vaneigem at the margins of the discussion, many critical studies of Debord, including Hussey's, see his work as essential to the Situationist project. Kaufmann, for example, is deeply suspicious of the idea that Lefebvre is all that important for understanding the entrance of Vaneigem into the SI, though he does not develop the point.¹³⁷ He notes that the arguments developed in Vaneigem's later work are not all that different from those he gave in *Traité*.¹³⁸ For this reason, Kaufmann argues, the later works embody a continuation of the Situationist project.¹³⁹ Indeed, Kaufmann sees Vaneigem as an important aspect of the Situationist story and French literature that has been overlooked by the critical field. In fact, Kaufmann describes the work of Vaneigem as 'une des pages les plus méconnues de l'histoire de la poésie française'.¹⁴⁰

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Hussey, *Game of War*, p. 264.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ 'This language of Vaneigem's book, poetic, fiery, imperious, had an immediate appeal for members of the European and American underground movements for whom 'Situationism' had so far been no more than a buzz-word with the same currency as hippie, beatnik, provo, mod or rocker. However, this was not the case with Debord's book', *ibid.*, p. 215.

¹³⁷ Kaufmann, p. 244.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 323.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 244.

There are problems, however, with the approach of Kaufmann towards the Situationists in that his interpretation of Debord is a decidedly literary one. Where Jappe had demonstrated the importance of Debord as a thinker in the Marxian sense of developing the theory of praxis, Kaufmann presents the SI as a largely aesthetic and literary practice. This is a methodological tendency common to many studies of Debord and the SI. It is problematic because it tends to overlook the more fundamental innovations of the Situationists by adopting the very non-totalising approaches the Situationists were struggling against.

Sadler, for example, offers a reading of the SI that positions the group in terms of innovators in the architectural sphere, rather than, the much more complicated position, as a movement to abolish architecture and urban planning as social separations.¹⁴¹ Joyce describes the SI in terms of ‘cultural politics’, as though the Situationists themselves really did embody the practices of their punk and post-modern recuperation.¹⁴² White and Goaman both offer PhDs that examine the adoption of Situationist ideas in movements and cultural practices that would have been critiqued by the group itself.¹⁴³ These cultural or history of art approaches to the Situationists continue to dominate much discourse on the SI.

In 1997 two ex-Situationists turned art historian and translator, Timothy Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, produced an article, for a special edition of the journal *October* on the SI, attacking these critical trends that had developed towards Debord and the SI in the 1990s.¹⁴⁴ Clark and Nicholson-Smith argue that four general trends

¹⁴¹ See Sadler, op. cit.

¹⁴² See Mary Joyce, ‘The Limits of Cultural Politics: The Situationist International, 1957-1971’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1997).

¹⁴³ See Graham White, ‘The Drama of Everyday Life: Situationist Theory in the Theatre of Counter-culture’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, East Sussex, 1995); Karen Goaman, ‘The Old World is behind you: the Situationists and beyond in contemporary anarchist currents’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University College London, 2002).

¹⁴⁴ Timothy Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, ‘Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International’, *October* (Winter 1997), pp. 15-31.

had developed in the critical reception of the SI designed to recuperate the movement. First, the SI is portrayed as an art organisation that only entered into politics later on.¹⁴⁵ Secondly, a position adopted by many of its admirers, the SI is an ‘art-political sect’ that did not concern itself with external political events because it was obsessed with maintaining an internal political purity.¹⁴⁶ Thirdly, Situationist politics is pure subjectivism that calls for a politics of everyday life, which amounts to nothing more than sloganeering.¹⁴⁷ Fourthly, Situationist theory itself is overly young-Hegelian and rhetorical in character with a ‘metaphysical hostility to mere appearances’.¹⁴⁸

Clark and Nicholson-Smith were essentially pointing out that the artistic interpretation of the SI, or the idea of a Situationist story conveniently divided into an ‘artistic’ and ‘political’ period was a gross oversimplification that meant avoiding the important ideas developed by the group over the issue of human creativity. By interpreting the Situationists as artists the group could be dismissed as revolutionary theorists. By reading them as an art-political sect one sidelined or reduced the essence of their theory to a naïve cultural politics. It is significant that Clark also wrote the preface to the English translation of Jappe, thereby supporting the more intellectual methodology of his study that had begun from reading Debord from the totalising perspective of human praxis, the creatively conscious dimension of human practice. The advantage of this approach is that each aspect of the Situationists can be interpreted as an extension of one essential problematic of alienation of human creativity.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

The past decade has seen studies that largely reiterate the complex reception of the Situationists in the 1990s. A good number of studies on the Situationists focus on the work of Guy Debord, France and on giving an art history interpretation of their work.¹⁴⁹ There have, however, been others that are properly concerned with the intellectual aspect of the Situationists, that is, closer examination of the core revolutionary ideas they put forward. Barnard, for example, is concerned with what the Situationists contributed, or were attempting to contribute, to contemporary revolutionary thought, rather than as an art enterprise.¹⁵⁰

Barnard has a methodological approach similar to Jappe that builds upon his work. Barnard describes the SI as ‘one of the most misinterpreted, misread and misrepresented political ‘organisations’ of the post-war period’.¹⁵¹ In contrast to many cultural studies, Barnard seeks to provide a reading of the SI that places their political theory at the heart of their project.¹⁵² Moreover, the theoretical exposition undertaken by Barnard explicitly takes both *Traité* and *Spectacle* as equally representative of Situationist theory: ‘An introduction to the thought of the SI must be an introduction to their collective work, not just the central figure’.¹⁵³ Barnard therefore offers by far the most extensive critical reading of Vaneigem in the literature.

Like Jappe, Barnard sees praxis and therefore alienation as a fundamental, and under-examined, aspect of Situationist thought and practice.¹⁵⁴ Barnard notes that concepts of isolation, alienation and reification are as clear or developed in the work

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Antoine Copolla, *Introduction au cinéma de Guy Debord et de l'avant-garde situationniste* (Arles: Sulliver, 2006); Danesi, Fabien, *Le mythe brisé de l'Internationale situationniste: L'aventure d'une avant-garde au cœur de la culture de masse (1945-2008)* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2008); Frances Tracey, ‘Pursuit of the Situationist Subject’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, London, 2001).

¹⁵⁰ Barnard, op. cit.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 84-85.

of Debord as they are in the work of Vaneigem.¹⁵⁵ Barnard gives a reading of the concept of alienation through *Traité*. As in previous studies, Barnard emphasises that Vaneigem provides a subjective critique, while Debord presents the more objective side of Spectacular society.¹⁵⁶ However, Barnard is ultimately highly critical of Vaneigem and makes explicit a general critique of him that is usually only implied in the critical field. Barnard states that the work of Vaneigem does not contain the ‘intellectual rigour’ of Debord and is instead defined more by a ‘Light Romanticism’.¹⁵⁷ He states that Vaneigem poses an ‘essentialist’ and ‘romantic’ idea of the pre-industrial past.¹⁵⁸ As such, Barnard states that Vaneigem is a ‘reactionary’ because he is not ‘forward-thinking’ and ‘utopian’ but ‘retrospective’.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, he states that Vaneigem’s ideas about pleasure lack a totalising perspective.¹⁶⁰ Barnard concludes that Vaneigem is therefore lacking in the political insight provided by Debord.¹⁶¹ Here Barnard demonstrates unfortunately poor scholarship in his approach to Vaneigem. Firstly, Barnard claims to offer a reading that incorporates both Vaneigem and Debord but he does not recognise that most of his secondary sources have focused exclusively on Debord. That is to say, a lot more work needs to be done on Vaneigem before he and Debord can be read on an equal basis in a study of this type. Secondly, Barnard evidently has only read English translations of Vaneigem and shows no awareness of the extensive literature by him that would provide a more complex picture of his arguments.

Thirdly, although Barnard provides an exposition of the critical theory of Vaneigem he does not do so on precisely those concepts such as totality and praxis on

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

the basis of which he critiques him for Romanticism. Rather, Barnard examines only the most superficial considerations of Vaneigem and fails to develop his critical thinking as a distinct entity from Debord, and even as an influence on Debord. In other words, he closely reads a concept such as ‘survivalism’ but not the more essential notion of ‘praxis’ through Vaneigem. Fourthly, Barnard provides an excellent account of the socio-economic changes in France in which the French section of the SI developed. However, he completely sidelines such considerations for other European countries, including Belgium where one of the two main subjects of his thesis comes from. Barnard and Jappe therefore both have a very useful methodological approach in relation to Debord but there is very little scholarly research by them into the work of Raoul Vaneigem. As such, we are left with two excellent works on Guy Debord that, however, provide very little insight into the work of Raoul Vaneigem even where this is the intention, as in the case of Barnard. The implication is always that Debord is the only coherent Marxian thinker within the SI and that Vaneigem is, if anything, an interesting but lesser pupil.

In 2004 Laurent Six produced the only lengthy book devoted to Raoul Vaneigem to date. Six does not attempt to create a critical commentary on the work of Raoul Vaneigem but rather presents a sort of annotated bibliography that, nonetheless, massively expanded our knowledge of just how extensive his writing is. Six researched the first lengthy bibliography of the work of Vaneigem and creates a short biographical section that is the first of its kind. Six stresses that Vaneigem is not the author of *Traité* alone.¹⁶² For Six, Vaneigem is a ‘baroque moderne. Il ne cesse de faire des plis. Il n’invente rien mais déplie, de livre en livre, une idée dont la

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 172.

connaissance est première'.¹⁶³ Six was obviously not attempting any kind of serious critical study of Vaneigem but his work is important in that it is the first to focus on the author alone and encourages the reader to think of him as a writer in his own right.

The only work since Barnard to specifically attempt to deviate from the Debordian history of the SI has been by McKenzie Wark (2011): 'Even when the Situationists are treated as a movement, the supposedly minor figures often drop out of the story, or become mere props to the *great men* among them'.¹⁶⁴ Wark is right in this respect but bizarrely he totally sidelines Vaneigem as though he had already been the subject of biography and detailed critical discussion as much as Debord. Evidently this is not the case. Indeed, one might object that good critical commentaries on Debord are also few and far between.

Wark is correct, however, that the critical field has focused primarily on Guy Debord to the exclusion of other members. The recent study of Marcolini, for example, which claims to be an intellectual history of the Situationists is also another highly Debordian take on the group that provides very little new insight into a body of theory and practice that is still hardly understood.¹⁶⁵ In Marcolini also, Vaneigem is a largely anecdotal presence and, despite the 'intellectual' methodology, Marcolini provides no new definitions and close reading of the key terms through his work, relying heavily on previous studies such as Jappe. Indeed, as Anselm Jappe writes in the preface to the second French edition of his study: 'Sur les milliers de pages consacrées ces derniers temps à Debord, l'analyse théorique est largement absente'.¹⁶⁶ This statement is even truer of Raoul Vaneigem.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street. The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 3.

¹⁶⁵ Patrick Marcolini, *Le Mouvement situationniste: Une histoire intellectuelle* (Paris: Éditions L'échappée, 2012)

¹⁶⁶ Jappe, *Guy Debord*, p. 12.

In summary, Vaneigem has been a constant presence in the extant literature on the Situationist International. But as I have demonstrated in this critical survey he has become a marginal figure. Since the 1960s, discussion of Guy Debord has increasingly come to dominate all studies of the Situationist International. Even those that have sought to provide insight on both his work and that of Guy Debord have tended to fail to do so in practice. This has led to a great number of misunderstandings both about the nature of the critical theory of Raoul Vaneigem and its place within the history of the Situationist International. It is this gap in the critical field that concerns us in the current work.

Methodology: Intellectual Biography

The above discussion has established the central aim and originality of this thesis: to provide the first extensive exposition and analysis of the theory of Raoul Vaneigem and his historical contribution to the Situationist International in order to revise our understanding of his life and work and the position it should occupy in the critical field. As the title of the current work states, the approach of ‘intellectual biography’ has been chosen to realise this goal. Intellectual biography is a genre of critical writing that makes reference to aspects of an author’s life in order to assess the development, character and impact of their ideas. In this sense intellectual biography offers a totalising perspective from which to understand a given body of work. It details the intellectual connections between its subject and other important figures of the period. It traces the evolution of their approach to a problematic over time. It defines the essence of the subject’s contribution to their historical moment.

Intellectual biography therefore allows one to combine the life and the work in order to reconsider the standing of the author in intellectual history. There are already a number of precedents for this approach in this specific field. Anselm Jappe's seminal *Guy Debord*, discussed above, is perhaps the most prominent example. The reason why this combination of the analysis of a life and of the theory it produced is so necessary in the case of Raoul Vaneigem is that in many ways the life and the theory are self-conscious reflections of one another. Subjective experience, everyday life, the anecdotal and biography are core sources and sites of theoretical examination for these authors: everything from work and the domestic sphere, to walking in urban environments and events, such as May '68, with world historical significance. It should not be forgotten that Vaneigem is a real, historical figure who was, and remains, active in the revolutionary struggles of his day. To ignore this 'lived' aspect of the work of Raoul Vaneigem would be to arbitrarily exclude a large part of its richness and, indeed, its historical import from our analysis. Intellectual biography allows us to convey this crucial relationship between theory and life.

Although this thesis is divided roughly into two periods—1934 to 1970 and 1971 to the present day—, a purely chronological presentation would make it difficult to consider the theory in isolation before examining its place in the historiography. It is for this reason that the current work begins with a theoretical analysis of 'Banalités de base' and *Traité*, published in 1962-1963 and 1967, respectively. Together these texts are treated as a whole that best represent the state of the theory of Raoul Vaneigem during his time as a member of the Situationist International and the core of his theoretical contribution to the group. They are also his most widely read and influential works of theory both then and now.

The analysis proceeds through a logical exposition, beginning with the most basic theoretical categories and assumptions employed by Vaneigem up to his most complex theories and concepts. There are several reasons that this method has been employed. First, one of the central arguments of this thesis is that a core aspect of the contribution of Raoul Vaneigem to the SI was his understanding of ‘praxis’ as the theoretical basis of radical critique. By focusing on this most basic concept from the very start, the more complex aspects of his theory can be seen as the logical result of a more fundamental argument. This helps us to establish the coherence of the overall theoretical framework Vaneigem develops. Secondly, the exposition of his theory allows us the space to clearly define exactly what Vaneigem means by such diverse terms as ‘médiation’, ‘réalisation’, ‘volonté de vivre’, ‘volonté de puissance’, ‘subjectivité’, ‘objectivité’, ‘créativité’, ‘spontanéité’, ‘survie’ and, crucially, ‘subjectivité radicale’ through close textual analysis. This not only helps to argue for the coherence of the theoretical framework developed by Vaneigem, it also allows us to open up his entire body of writing, which until now has often seemed to many to be hermeneutically sealed. Thirdly, by debuting with this theoretical exposition, the reader will have the foundational terminology and concepts to hand when the thesis moves on to historical analysis and later theoretical developments.

With the first movement of theoretical analysis complete, the thesis moves on to contextualising it through an assessment of the relationship between Raoul Vaneigem and Belgian modernity. The term ‘Belgian modernity’ here is used in two senses: first, the history of capitalist social relations in Belgium in the twentieth century, and secondly, the modernist and avant-garde cultural movements that emerged in Belgium in the late 1890s and which largely came to a conclusion in the early 1970s.

In the first case, the current work employs the relevant autobiographical writing by Vaneigem, as well as some historiography on Belgian social history, to establish a picture of the industrial world and working-class communities in which Vaneigem grew up and in which his political consciousness was formed. An important aspect of this task is an extensive examination of the Belgian general strike of the winter of 1960-1961, Hiver '60, through sources from the period with which Situationists would have been familiar or to which they contributed. Vaneigem took part in this strike and it was the context in which he first joined the Situationist International. Vaneigem is largely situated in relation to these aspects of Belgian modernity through an analysis of the more autobiographical sections of his work and its possible impact on the contents of *Traité*. This socio-cultural and biographical historical analysis provides the basis for claiming that Belgian modernity, in particular its class struggle expression, is a crucial context for understanding the origins of Vaneigem's critical theory and the author's immediate impact on the SI upon his arrival.

In the second instance, the thesis draws on the definition of Belgian modernity theorised by Nathalie Aubert and others in *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism: Belgian Modernity in the Making* (2007).¹⁶⁷ There is an assessment of how these qualities of Belgian modernity compare with aspects of the work of Vaneigem. As such, it is possible to discuss the extent to which Vaneigem is part of a modernist tradition specific to his home region. From here the thesis analyses the relationship of Vaneigem with specific individuals that made up the Surrealist group in Hainaut and the local tradition of proletarian literature. This analysis is largely based on a presentation of his own texts written about Belgian and Parisian Surrealism, and it is

¹⁶⁷ See Nathalie Aubert and others, 'Preface', *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism, Belgian Modernity in the Making* (London: Legenda, 2007).

augmented by the inclusion of some original primary material by the authors concerned. This is followed by an exposition of the unpublished university *mémoire* by Vaneigem on another avant-garde figure, Isidore Ducasse, le Comte de Lautréamont, which allows the thesis to consider the state of his critical theory at this time.

Taken together, these two analyses of the relationship of Raoul Vaneigem to different aspects of Belgian modernity provide an historical overview of his early and pre-Situationist intellectual development, as well as the importance of local influence to his work.

This socio-cultural history is followed by an historical analysis of Vaneigem as an active member of the Situationist International. The thesis divides this study into three chronological periods: 1961-1964, 1965-1968 and 1969-1970. These divisions of time are made according to roughly defined periods of activity. 1961-1964 mainly covers the entrance of Vaneigem into the SI, his role in the exclusion of the artists and his early contribution to Situationist theory. 1965-1968 examines his role in the Strasbourg scandal of 1966, in the exclusion of the English members of the SI, the publication of *Traité* and the events of May '68. Finally, 1969-1970 looks at the place of Vaneigem in the aftermath of these events, the breakdown of his friendship with Guy Debord and, ultimately, his resignation from the Situationist International. Our analysis draws on a variety of primary sources such as the Situationists' journal *Internationale situationniste*, Guy Debord's correspondence and other Situationist material in order to establish the facts of the engagement of Vaneigem in the group. This allows the thesis to provide an assessment of the practical contribution of Raoul Vaneigem to the Situationist International, of the context in which his theory was disseminated and of its position within the wider collective project of the group. The

aim is both to counteract the ‘great man’ tendency of a work such as this, which is consecrated to a single author, and to once more contextualise the practice from which his theory emerged. It also allows us to consider some of the immediate impact of this theory in the 1960s. This historical analysis ends the first section of our study which is centred on Vaneigem both before and during his membership of the Situationist International.

The second part of the thesis is devoted to a theoretical analysis of the post-Situationist work of Raoul Vaneigem. The previous exposition of ‘Banalités de base’ and *Traité* lay the groundwork for this discussion by providing a point of reference for understanding later developments in the theory. This new movement of theoretical analysis is divided into two parts. The first examines the main theoretical developments in the work of Raoul Vaneigem since his resignation from the SI. The second focuses specifically on his critique of religion.

The first theoretical analysis is centred for the most part on the key book length essays of general theory that Vaneigem has published in this period. These include *Le Livre des plaisirs* (1979), *Adresse aux vivants sur la mort qui les gouverne* (1990), and *L'Ère des créateurs* (2002).¹⁶⁸ Through a series of theoretical comparisons the thesis seeks to establish the relationship between the developments in the theory found in these texts with the psychological theories of the American psychotherapist Alexander Lowen, whose works were first published in France in the 1970s. On the basis of this relationship the thesis argues that many of the major later developments in the work of Raoul Vaneigem can be traced back to an engagement with Lowen. As such, it is argued, Vaneigem is exploring the issue of the psychological form of the subject of capitalist social relations because for Lowen the

¹⁶⁸ See Raoul Vaneigem, *Le Livre des plaisirs* (Paris: Encre, 1979), *Adresse aux vivants sur la mort qui les gouverne et l'opportunité de s'en défaire* (Paris : Seghers, 1990), *L'Ère des créateurs* (Brussels: Complexe, 2002).

capitalist subject is essentially defined by a ‘fear of pleasure’. Equally, this discovery opens up a theoretical understanding of non-capitalist or liberated subjects. This analysis allows a logical exposition of the theoretical categories and language that Vaneigem employs in his later work because the theory of Lowen helps us to better understand exactly what is happening in these texts. Terms such as ‘le vivant’, ‘gratuité’, ‘le corps’, ‘peur de jouissance’ can be revealed as essentially a terminology employed to discuss issues around the effect of modern life on capitalist subjects, and the potential psychological forms and praxis of non-capitalist subjects. This latter is explored in particular through the only novel Vaneigem has written, *Voyage à Oarystis*, that describes a visit to a non-capitalist utopia.¹⁶⁹

The second theoretical examination of the later work of Raoul Vaneigem centres on his critique of religion. The analysis focuses on the extensive theoretical and historical works on Christianity and heresy that Vaneigem has devoted much time to since his resignation from the SI: *Le Mouvement du Libre-Esprit* (1986), *Les Controverses du christianisme* (1992), *La Résistance au christianisme* (1993), and *De l’inhumanité de la religion* (2000).¹⁷⁰ As with the previous two theoretical analyses, this examination proceeds from the most basic fundamentals of Vaneigem’s theory of religion. The primary task is to establish the definition of religion that Vaneigem gives in his theoretical work. The analysis then moves on to explore why Vaneigem considers the critique of religion an essential aspect of the critique of commodity society. Building on these new considerations and the earlier theoretical discussion, the thesis moves on to consider the importance of heresy to the work of Raoul Vaneigem and the meaning of his use of the language of mysticism and alchemy in

¹⁶⁹ Raoul Vaneigem, *Voyage à Oarystis* (Blandain: Éditions de l’Estuaire, 2005)

¹⁷⁰ Raoul Vaneigem, *Le Mouvement du Libre-Esprit; généralités et témoignages sur les affleurements de la vie à la surface du Moyen Age, de la Renaissance, et, incidemment, de notre époque* [1986] (Paris: L’Or des fous, 2005), [Tristan Hannaniel], *Les Controverses du christianisme* (Paris: Bordas, 1992), *De l’inhumanité de la religion* (Paris: Denoël, 2000).

his work. In so doing the current work is able to explain how this metaphorical language is grounded in the fundamental theoretical categories of Vaneigem that have been analysed and presented throughout.

The thesis concludes with a critical reappraisal of the theory of Raoul Vaneigem, which has now been properly established by the current work, from the perspective of the ‘critique of value’. The ‘critique of value’ is a school of thought that emerged out of debates that took place in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s that argued for a break with traditional Marxism by returning to the critique of the basic categories of capitalist society begun by Marx. Its main body of theory is best represented by Moishe Postone (1942-) in the United States,¹⁷¹ by the late Robert Kurz (1942-2012) in Germany,¹⁷² and by Anselm Jappe (1962-) in France.¹⁷³ The ‘critique of value’ stresses the fetishistic nature of a society based on the logic of the value form. In this schema capitalism is essentially a type of domination ‘without a subject’, where capitalist social relations themselves, not necessarily individuals and their subjective intentions, embody the role of oppressor. In capitalist society therefore human needs and concrete reality are thus subsumed beneath the logical requirements of an ‘automatic subject’, the value form. As a result, human subjects—worker and capitalist—are merely the vessels for the process of value’s incessant and tautological valorisation. This has led, on the one hand, to the gradual transformation of humanity into the narcissistic agents of value, and on the other, the destruction of the material world through the brutal demands of purely abstract necessity. These

¹⁷¹ See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁷² The major works of Kurz have yet to be translated into English. However, there are several independently published translations of selected essays. See, for example, Robert Kurz, *Marx 2000* (London: Chronos Publications, 2002) and *No Revolution Anywhere* (London: Chronos Publications, 2012).

¹⁷³ See, Anselm Jappe, *Les Aventures de la marchandise: Pour une nouvelle critique de la valeur* (Paris: Denoël, 2003) and *Crédit à mort: La décomposition du capitalisme et ses critiques* (Paris: Lignes, 2011).

realities, for the ‘critique of value’, define the conditions of emancipation in our time. It will not take a wilful act of revolution to destroy capitalism, it is already collapsing due to the inherent limits of the process of valorisation. The question now is whether humanity will have the theory capable of overcoming the dehumanising effects of the social categories of competition, work and the state when their very basis in the valorisation of value has fallen away.

Although the ‘critique of value’ is mainly discussed towards the end of our theoretical examination, it has proved to be invaluable throughout the current work in providing a critical perspective from which to judge the theory of Vaneigem and the Situationist relationship to fetishism. In many ways the SI could be thought to have been forerunners of this theory. I was also particularly aided in understanding the ideas of Vaneigem around the theory of praxis by the chapter ‘Totality and dialectic in Hegel and Marx’ in Felton Shorthall’s *The Incomplete Marx*. Shorthall is a member of the Open Marxist school of thought that, although still remaining in the class-struggle sphere of thinking, is based on a non-deterministic view of history and a rejection of authoritarian forms of emancipation.

The reason that I have chosen to focus on the political and theoretical aspects of the writing of Raoul Vaneigem rather than its literary qualities is that I feel these are the most important and underexamined elements of his work. There is no doubt that Vaneigem has a brilliant style and that his oeuvre embodies one of the most impressive examples of French prose in the twentieth century. Certainly, this is part of its charm and what has made it attractive to certain readers. However, Vaneigem is not primarily a ‘literary’ author and he is, indeed, an enemy of ‘culture’ in this sense. His work aims at inciting people to the real, radical transformation of society, not purely literary enjoyment. Moreover, for a long time Vaneigem has been treated as a

largely rhetorical and lyrical figure, where Debord has tended to dominate theoretical discussion of the SI. This is a trend that I would like to combat with this thesis. There is, of course, a place in the critical field for further discussion of the more literary aspects of the work of Raoul Vaneigem but they must be seen as secondary to the theoretical and political. Further, as the current work hopes to demonstrate, even the more poetic language of Vaneigem is rooted in a decidedly Marxian critical framework.

The final key in the methodology of the thesis was to establish the most extensive bibliography of the work of Raoul Vaneigem to date. This included archival research in both Brussels and Amsterdam that uncovered material previously unknown to the field. The Bibliothèque royale Albert I in Brussels contains a number of manuscripts by Raoul Vaneigem and also his correspondence with his *mémoire* supervisor Emilie Noulet. It was here that I found his film script of a never produced biopic of the life of the *hennuyer* author Charles-Joseph de Ligne discussed in chapter 2 of the current work. I also visited the Université Libre de Bruxelles in order consult the second version of the university *mémoire* discussed in the same chapter. At the Situationist Archive at the Institute of Social History in Amsterdam one can also examine the original manuscript of *Traité* that contains passages expunged from the published version. Although not all of this material has been discussed in the current work directly, it has all informed my reading and understanding of the main texts dealt with in the thesis. This bibliography will lay the groundwork for future publications and editions, and, I believe, prove extremely useful to other researchers in this field.

Chapter 1. ‘Banalités de base’ and *Traité*: Praxis in the Critical Thought of Raoul Vaneigem

Car seule l'incessante relation de la théorie et de la praxis vécue permet d'espérer la fin de toutes les dualités, le règne de la totalité, la fin du pouvoir de l'homme sur l'homme.¹⁷⁴

The aim of the current chapter is to clarify how Raoul Vaneigem interprets Marx and how this interpretation serves as the basis for the key critical positions, ideas and terminology he develops in his work. In order to achieve this aim, the main objective of this chapter is to provide an original reading of Vaneigem's crucial contributions to the Situationist International in the 1960s: ‘Banalités de base’ (1961-1962) and *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (1967). These texts are generally considered to be the core of the work of Raoul Vaneigem, his most influential writing, and they contain the most detailed discussion of the author's basic critical framework. Further, in many ways the texts embody a maturation of Raoul Vaneigem's thought as represented in his university *mémoire*, discussed in the following chapter, and were central to the transformation the SI underwent in its later period.

The largely implicit interpretation of Marx that Raoul Vaneigem develops in his work has never been the subject of detailed study. Guy Debord, on the other hand, has been given this treatment in the work of Anselm Jappe. In his 1993 study, *Guy Debord*, Jappe explained the theorist of the Spectacle in more familiar Marxist terms. To achieve this Jappe focused on the indebtedness of Debord to the interpretation of Marx's theory of praxis by György Lukács in the latter's *History and Class*

¹⁷⁴*Traité*, p. 124.

Consciousness (1920). Jappe correctly demonstrates the centrality of the theory of praxis, the creatively conscious dimension of human practice, to the Situationist reading of Marx. However, in focusing on Debord, Jappe ignores the far more detailed and explicit discussion of praxis to be found in the work of Raoul Vaneigem. Indeed, Jappe is very dismissive of Vaneigem's contribution to the SI and his understanding of Marx. Since Jappe, the doctoral thesis of Adam Barnard in 2002 is one of the few critical works to have examined the relationship between a Situationist interpretation of Marx, rooted in the theory of praxis, and the organisation's critical perspectives. However, despite reading Vaneigem alongside Debord, Barnard relies heavily on Jappe's discussion of Lukàcs. He provides no close textual analysis of Vaneigem's own writing on the subject and his explanation of the critical perspectives put forward in *Traité* suffers greatly as a result.

The need for a new reading of Vaneigem based on an examination of his own critical interpretation of Marx is a necessary one; not only because it has not been done before, but because it is fundamental to how his critical perspective, that is to say, his historical contribution to the SI and sixties radicalism, is understood. The meaning of terms such as radical subjectivity, survivalism and even the most basic, such as creativity, have too often been taken for granted in the critical literature, with no clear explanation rooted in the arguments and words of Raoul Vaneigem himself. The clarification undertaken in the current chapter is therefore meant to lay the groundwork for a richer and more accurate comprehension of the importance of Raoul Vaneigem's contribution to the Situationist International, May '68 and its afterlives.

The reading of Marx that Raoul Vaneigem develops in his work is for the most part present in his critical positions and use of terminology. Vaneigem has never written for an academic audience and his writing is not packed with direct citations

and references to Marx. Nor can it be said that Vaneigem is particularly concerned with a rehabilitation of Marx or the kind of exposition that is presented here.¹⁷⁵ For Vaneigem, Marx is always a source of inspiration to a critique that is eminently practical, ever changing and concerned with a radical transformation of the present. His audience is the everyday, alienated individual, not the specialist or expert. For this reason much of the interpretation of 'Marx' I analyse here is therefore implicit, even while Vaneigem is far more explicit and detailed in how he interprets Marx's theories than Debord.

The Theory of Praxis

The theory of praxis that Raoul Vaneigem defines and develops in his work is the fundamental critical assumption he draws from the work of Marx. For Vaneigem it is on the theory of praxis that Marx based his critique of commodity society. It is also the basis on which Marx demonstrated the possibility of communist society. Raoul Vaneigem first outlined his definition of the theory and its importance as an ontological starting point for revolutionary critique in theses 27 and 28 of 'Banalités de base'. These passages are the most detailed description of praxis to be found in the work of any Situationist, Guy Debord included, and, as will be argued in chapter 3 of the current work, were key to the new direction the SI took after the Gothenburg conference of 1961.

Praxis can be defined as the consciously creative dimension of human practice. Marx's theory of praxis, as understood by Vaneigem, is that Man,

¹⁷⁵ This is not to say, however, that Vaneigem is not highly aware of what is, at least from his own perspective and one shared by many more recent schools of Marxian thought, a falsification of Marx by the official left; as he remarks with irony, 'De Marx, il est vrai, les spécialistes de la révolution connaissent surtout ce qu'il a écrit sous le pseudonyme de Staline, ou au mieux de Lénine et Trotski', *Traité*, p. 268.

subjectivity, and Nature, objectivity, are a dialectical unity created through the mediation of this conscious human activity that develops through time.¹⁷⁶ Vaneigem is therefore fundamentally an essentialist because for him praxis is the essence of what it means to be human.¹⁷⁷ That is to say, for Vaneigem, to be human means to engage in a conscious and imaginative process of world and self-creation.¹⁷⁸ At the same time, this means that Vaneigem is also in some sense an anti-essentialist because concrete human praxis is not fixed but is defined, if anything, by its *lack* of fixism.¹⁷⁹ The essential content and shape of human life, individual and collective, changes throughout history and between societies as a result of a process of self-transformation.

Equally, it makes no sense for Vaneigem, and arguably Marx, to think of subjectivity and objectivity, of human consciousness and reality, as distinct categories.¹⁸⁰ Such an approach denies the fact that humanity is a part of reality, that praxis reveals humanity as an objective-subjective creature. There is no objectivity, however defined, for Vaneigem, that is not a product of the human subject (even at the most basic level that observation and understanding of Nature involves conscious activity on the part of the subject). At the same time, there is no subjectivity or human subject that is not itself a product of its environment, social and ‘natural’. For this reason, Vaneigem and Marx are both materialists because they are aware that praxis

¹⁷⁶ ‘seule la praxis fonde le rapport entre les hommes et la nature’, ‘Banalités (II)’, p. 45; ‘le monde objectif (ou la nature, comme on veut)’, *Traité*, p. 110.

¹⁷⁷ The theory of praxis is a revolutionary theory and not a purely descriptive or metaphysical one. The aim of the theory, as is discussed below, is to liberate the activity it describes. Moreover, the theory itself is a self-conscious product of this activity. Cf. ‘les faits saisis de façon statique dans un système d’interprétation du monde et les faits saisis dans leur devenir, dans la *praxis* qui les transforme’, *ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁷⁸ Vaneigem affirms this statement regularly throughout his work, often negatively (in the sense that it is an essence that has been perverted or alienated): ‘l’homme [...] transforme [le monde] et se transforme’, *ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁷⁹ ‘L’erreur des philosophes fut de construire une ontologie et une idée d’homme éternel sur ce qui n’était qu’un accident social, une nécessité contingente’, *ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁸⁰ This is not to say that they are immediately identical. Vaneigem is clear in ‘Banalités (II)’ that it is a mediated unity: ‘seule la praxis fonde le rapport entre les hommes et la nature’, *op. cit.*. The accusation of mysticism aimed at Vaneigem on this point by Jappe is therefore unfounded.

takes place within given historical circumstances, natural and social. On the level of social critique this is important because praxis is not *only* an individual process but *also* a social totality in which all subjectivities take part.¹⁸¹ The manner in which the human essence expresses itself, in thought and practice, is therefore dependent on the social relations in which praxis takes place. However, these social relationships themselves are only ever provisional and can be consciously transformed by human beings through praxis.

On an individual level this is an obvious point. If a person were to decorate a table then her transformation of that object is defined by the fact that another person has already arranged Nature in the form of a table, by the materials she has to hand, by the time she can devote to the project, by whether she has creative control over the decorative design etc. The decoration of the table is already defined in some way by the conditions under which creativity is to take place. The same applies to any other human activity, in thought and practice. Vaneigem administers this logic to the whole of society. Our individual and collective process of consciously transforming the world and ourselves is defined by the historical social relations in which it takes place. The theory of praxis, therefore, grasps the human essence as both trans-historical, in the most abstract sense, and as historically situated, in the most concrete.

With the practical, essentialist and materialist character of the theory of praxis established it becomes possible to consider what the term ‘alienation’ means to Raoul Vaneigem. In ‘Banalités de base (II)’, Vaneigem makes a distinction between *praxis*

¹⁸¹ ‘L’organisation des sociétés humaines a changé le monde, et le monde en changeant a bouleversé l’organisation des sociétés humaines’, *Traité*, p. 205.

and *praxis aliénée*.¹⁸² These two forms of praxis in Marx have been designated ‘first’ and ‘second order mediation’, respectively, in some Marxist literature.¹⁸³ For the sake of clarity they will be referred to as such.

First order mediation, or praxis, is the basic theory of praxis outlined above. For Vaneigem, what distinguishes human beings from other animals (or in Hegelian terms, what makes Man and Nature a mediated unity rather than a completely immediate one) is the former’s ability to be conscious of what it creates.¹⁸⁴ In *Capital* Marx famously contrasted the way in which the bee builds its beehive and the architect builds her building.¹⁸⁵ Although the creation of the bee can put the architect to ‘shame’ in its beauty, the architect nevertheless has to imagine her own construction before she undertakes it.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, it could be added that where the bee is pre-programmed by Nature or evolution to produce only the beehive, the architect can, given the right circumstances, produce any building she can imagine. As such, an immediate unity exists between the bee and Nature/objectivity, while subjectivity is involved for human beings, as they must imagine what they produce.¹⁸⁷ The act of creation for human beings is therefore one in which they turn their subjectivity into objectivity; a process Marx calls ‘objectification’ and what

¹⁸² ‘La praxis, même aliénée, est ce qui maintient le contact avec la totalité’, Vaneigem, ‘Banalités (II)’, p. 45; ‘Dans la perspective de la praxis, tout fragment est totalité. Dans la perspective du pouvoir, qui aliène la praxis, tout fragment est totalitaire’, *ibid.*

¹⁸³ See Shorthall, p. 99. Shorthall is drawing on Chris Arthur, *The Dialectics of Labour* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), and István Meszaros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin, 1970).

¹⁸⁴ ‘Ce qui différencie l'enfant de l'animal tient à ce que l'enfant possède le sens de la transformation du monde, c'est-à-dire la poésie, à un degré illimité’, *Traité*, p. 277.

¹⁸⁵ See Karl Marx, trans. Ben Fowkes, *Capital Vol. 1* [1867] (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 283-284.

¹⁸⁶ ‘A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cell. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax’, *ibid.*, p. 284.

¹⁸⁷ ‘At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realises [*verwirklicht*] his own purposes in those materials’, *ibid.*, p. 284.

Vaneigem terms 'la réalisation' or, as in thesis 27 of 'Banalités de base (II)', 'la réalisation objective dans l'objectivité'.¹⁸⁸

'Objectification' or 'réalisation' occurs through the process of 'mediation' by which human beings consciously shape objectivity. Mediation as such encompasses every way in which a human being objectifies herself in the natural world and in society, from language and tilling a field to sculpture and the construction of a city. Mediations are therefore 'concrete' in the sense that they are real, conscious practices that unite human beings with nature; or, to put it another way, they are the means through which humanity realises its creative essence.¹⁸⁹ Praxis and its various forms (mediations), therefore unite all humanity as the bearers of the same dialectical process and, at the same time, reveals its essence to be an infinitely varied process of creation specific to each individual. This last point forms the basis for the 'subjectivité radicale' argument Vaneigem develops in *Traité*, discussed below.

In the work of Vaneigem first order mediation contains a final key element, not made explicit in Marx, termed 'le vécu' or lived experience.¹⁹⁰ Praxis tells us that humanity is a part of reality and that our knowledge of reality arises from our

¹⁸⁸ Vaneigem, 'Banalités (II)', p. 45. Barnard refers to 'objectification' in Vaneigem. See Barnard, p. 114. However, it is not a term used by Vaneigem and certainly not in the sense defined here (i.e. 'réalisation', the term he does use). What Barnard is in fact referring to is an aspect of reification, see below, wherein alienating social relations reduce human beings to the state of objects (that is to say, they are treated as animals, machines, commodities etc.).

¹⁸⁹ Another way of expressing this would be that the 'concrete' is human practice understood within the totality of the subjective-objective historical moment: emotions, thoughts, feelings, social relationships, materials etc. As such, the concrete constitutes reality: 'la totalité réelle (la réalité)', 'Banalités (II)', p. 45. Vaneigem refers to the concrete throughout his œuvre in this sense; for example, 'Sous une forme concrète et tactique, le concept de lutte des classes a constitué le premier regroupement des heurts et des dérèglements vécus individuellement par les hommes; il est né du tourbillon de souffrances que la réduction des rapports humains à des mécanismes d'exploitation suscitait partout dans les sociétés industrielles', *Traité*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁹⁰ Some examples of the use of *le vécu* in *Traité*: 'Désormais, pour élaborer une collectivité harmonieuse, la théorie révolutionnaire devra se fonder non plus sur la base du communautaire mais sur la subjectivité, sur les cas spécifiques, sur le vécu particulier', pp. 214-215; 'Il n'y a pas d'autorité en dehors de ma propre expérience vécue', p. 253; 'En incitant les prolétaires à s'emparer de la théorie tirée du vécu et du non-vécu quotidien, le *Traité* prenait, en même temps que le parti du dépassement, le risque de toutes les falsifications auxquelles l'exposait le retard de sa mise en œuvre insurrectionnelle', p. 356; 'Les surréalistes, certains du moins, avaient compris que le seul dépassement valable de l'art était dans le vécu', p. 149. Vaneigem sometimes uses the terms 'la vie' and 'la réalité' relatively synonymously with 'le vécu'; this is possible due to the totalising nature of these categories.

conscious and practical existence within it and shaping it.¹⁹¹ Philosophy, on the other hand, seeks out reality as though it were something external to conscious, practical life. The notion of the ‘vécu’ is therefore an antidote to philosophy because it asserts that the only reality that matters is human experience. For Vaneigem reality—knowledge of the world—is therefore the reality that each human being lives everyday and cannot be found through abstract speculation: ‘Il y a plus de vérités dans vingt-quatre heures de la vie d’un homme que dans toutes les philosophies’.¹⁹² Reality embodies the thoughts and feelings that make up the imaginative and consciously creative dimension of human practice. Human praxis, ‘le vécu’, *is* reality for all intents and purposes.

The ‘vécu’ is for these reasons key to understanding the notion of ‘authenticité’ that Vaneigem puts forward. For Raoul Vaneigem, like the best of the proletarian literature authors, the authenticity of any thought or action is found in the extent to which its version of reality is rooted in the subjective experience of the author in interaction with the world (and, of course, a desire to transform that reality).¹⁹³ For Vaneigem, the reality put forward by praxis, including his own writing, is always consciously practical and based in lived experience.¹⁹⁴ This is what establishes, in a practical sense, the ‘authenticité’ of a book, of a way of living or a critique.¹⁹⁵ That is to say, the authentic is *le vécu*.¹⁹⁶ This is not to say, however, that

¹⁹¹ ‘ma connaissance du monde n'existe valablement qu'à l'instant où je le transforme’, *Traité*, pp. 124-125.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁹³ The following chapter of this thesis discusses the possible origins of Vaneigem’s notion of authenticity in proletarian literature. See pages 144 of the current work.

¹⁹⁴ ‘Un principe me paraît bien établi: dès qu’un langage cesse d’obéir à la volonté de réalisation, il falsifie la communication; il ne communique plus que cette abusive promesse de vérité qui s’appelle mensonge. Mais ce mensonge est la vérité de ce qui me détruit, me corrompt, me soumet’, *Traité*, p. 131.

¹⁹⁵ ‘Si l’individu voulait considérer le monde non plus dans la perspective du pouvoir mais dans une perspective dont il soit le point de départ, il aurait tôt fait de déceler les actes qui le libèrent vraiment, les moments les plus authentiquement vécus, qui sont comme des trous de lumière dans la grisaille des rôles. Observer les rôles à la lumière du vécu authentique, les radiographier si l’on veut, permettrait

Vaneigem eschews all abstract thought (the notion of ‘praxis’, for example, is an abstraction). Rather, it is an argument against a type of thinking that is not ultimately rooted in the concrete experiences, needs and desires that define our everyday lives.

Finally, first order mediation reveals, for Vaneigem, the ontological basis for communist society because it demonstrates that social change is possible. Human beings can at any time imagine alternative social relations and objectify those social relations through mediation. Correspondingly, this possibility offers an idea of what communism would mean: the liberation of first order mediation in order to realise the autonomy of individuals and humanity as a whole. To understand this latter, revolutionary, aspect of praxis, however, it is necessary to understand the subjugation of praxis in fetishistic societies, that is to say, alienation.

Second order meditation, or *praxis aliénée*, is a historically specific form of first order mediation that occurs only in human groups where hierarchical social relations have developed. In these societies, the domination of one part of humanity over another takes hold of the human ability to consciously shape itself and the world through practice. Or, in more Hegelian terms, power and the class that holds it hijack concrete mediation, the ability of the subject to objectify itself in nature.¹⁹⁷ In Chapter 11 of *Traité*, significantly entitled ‘Abstraction médiatisée et médiation abstraite’,

d'en détourner l'énergie qui s'y est investie, de sortir la vérité du mensonge', *Traité*, p. 179. Vaneigem also cites ‘le docteur Solié’ on the importance of authenticity: ‘Il n'y a pas de maladie en soi, de même qu'il n'y a pas de malade en soi, il n'y a qu'un être-dans-le-monde authentique ou inauthentique’, cited in *ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁹⁶ Further, the *vécu* can be both authentic or, in the context of second order mediation, discussed below, authentically inauthentic. This latter, seemingly paradoxical position, has two aspects: first, our concrete practice can be alienated, at odds with the demands that arise from our own lived experiences, and, secondly, as above, our lived experiences of alienated practice reveal the inhuman nature of alienation more accurately than the abstract thought of philosophy.

¹⁹⁷ ‘Le pouvoir s’intercale parasitairement comme une médiation indispensable entre les hommes et la nature’, ‘Banalités (II)’, p. 45.

Vaneigem describes how *praxis*, or first order mediation, becomes *praxis aliénée*, or second order mediation, as a result of hierarchical social relationships:

‘La médiation,’ dit Hegel, ‘est l’égalité avec soi-même-se-mouvant’. Mais se mouvoir peut être aussi se perdre. Et lorsqu’il ajoute: ‘C’est le moment du *meurs* et du *deviens*’, il n’y a pas un mot à changer pour que le sens diffère radicalement selon la perspective où l’on se place, celle du pouvoir ou celle de l’homme total.

La médiation échappe-t-elle à mon contrôle, c’est aussitôt vers l’étrange que m’entraîne une démarche que je crois mienne. Engels montrait judicieusement qu’une pierre, un fragment de la nature étrangère à l’homme, devenait humaine sitôt qu’elle prolongeait la main en servant d’outil (et la pierre humanise à son tour la main de l’hominien.) Mais approprié par un maître, un patron, une commission de *planning*, une organisation dirigeante, l’outil change de sens, il dévie vers d’autres prolongements les gestes de celui qui en use. Ce qui est vrai pour l’outil vaut pour toutes les médiations.¹⁹⁸

There is a literary quality to these phrases that conveys the sense of a dialectic dynamic between subject and object that is in danger of escaping humanity’s conscious control. It is based on a series of dualisms: death and becoming, control and loss, the human and the inhuman. Even at the most basic level of human interaction with the natural world, Vaneigem suggests, there is a process that risks taking human beings away from what makes them what they are. The stone is an alien fragment that becomes human through creative appropriation. Yet this appropriation of nature can also become the appropriation of mankind by something external in a society that is itself fragmented. The Hegelian turn here is important as it brings Vaneigem close to the more radical aspects of Marx: the critique of fetishism. We can interpret this as meaning that power, for Vaneigem, is what happens when mediations, the various ways in which human beings objectify themselves in nature, escape our control.¹⁹⁹

The question of autonomy and hierarchy is therefore a crucial one to the theory of praxis in Vaneigem and his interpretation of the work of Marx. In the

¹⁹⁸ *Traité*, p. 123.

¹⁹⁹ ‘Le pouvoir est la somme des médiations aliénées et aliénantes’, *ibid.*, p. 123.

context of second order mediation, the concrete mediation that unites and distinguishes Man and Nature, subjectivity and objectivity, has its immediate subjective reality abstracted, literally ‘drawn out’.²⁰⁰ There is an inversion of the normal process of praxis where the subject, Man, rather than consciously forming the world, becomes the cypher of an objective process beyond its control. Vaneigem calls this ‘la réalisation objective dans la subjectivité [...] qui est celle du pouvoir’.²⁰¹ The mediation of human praxis instead of serving concrete human needs and desires obeys a totally alien and separate logic. In such circumstances mankind effectively produces an abstract determining presence with its own laws that is nonetheless created by human activity. It is for this reason that Vaneigem refers to ‘médiation abstraite’ or abstract mediation and ‘abstraction médiatisée’ or mediated abstraction. What is abstracted is precisely the qualitative needs, desires and rich consciousness—the totality in short—of each individual subject: ‘La façon de voir, imposée par le pouvoir, ‘abstrait’ les médiations de leur fonction initiale, qui est de prolonger dans le réel les exigences du vécu’.²⁰²

(Concrete-) abstract mediation, or second order mediation, is therefore a process where objectification produces an objectivity where the subject is essentially alien to itself.²⁰³ That is to say, in second order mediation, the subject actually produces an objectivity that is the product of its own praxis but *is also* alien to it.²⁰⁴ People who live in hierarchical social relationships are forced to create material changes to Nature that they have neither decided on themselves nor over which they

²⁰⁰ ‘*ab-trahere*, tirer hors de’, *ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁰¹ ‘Banalités (II)’, p. 45.

²⁰² *Traité*, p. 121.

²⁰³ Vaneigem does not use the term ‘concrete-abstraction’ but it is implicit, see below, and, in the form of an absolute, is presented as the future of hierarchical social relationships: ‘L’autorité, à son stade ultime, va culminer dans l’union de l’abstrait et du concret. Le pouvoir abstrait déjà comme on guillotine encore. La face du monde éclairé par lui s’ordonne selon une métaphysique du réel’, *ibid.*, p. 127.

²⁰⁴ ‘Le monde se transforme dans le sens où il existe un travail forcé; et c’est pourquoi il se transforme si mal’, *ibid.*, p. 70.

have eventual control.²⁰⁵ The worker not only produces a world she has not consciously chosen and over which she has no real hold, she also produces herself as a ‘worker’, a concrete-abstract social form, and not therefore as a human being in the essential sense of a person who practices praxis according to concrete individual and collective human needs and desires. The very objectivity created by the subject—even, by extension, its own subjectivity—is alien to it. In hierarchical social relationships objectification therefore becomes ‘alienation’.

However, alienation does not only apply to the more dramatic forms of human creation such as the manufacture of physical objects. Human thought and imagination are as much a product of first order mediation, or praxis, as any other aspect of the world produced by humanity. In free praxis, or liberated first order mediation, human thought is purely practical in the sense that thinking, emotions, the full complexity of the human consciousness in short, is inherent to the human transformation of Nature and objectivity to meet the desires of the subject. But in second order mediation, Vaneigem argues, thought *appears* to stand over and above real activity and lived experience, and, in a limited sense, actually does so in the form of specialists of this abstract thought such as aristocrats, philosophers, union bosses, ideologues, capitalists, theologians etc. that manage human practices. As such alienated thought, ‘la pensée séparée’ or ‘abstraction médiatisée’, as it is variously termed by Vaneigem, attempts to impose itself as both a limitation on what practices are possible and, as a result, what forms of objectivity are possible. Hence ‘la pensée séparée’ has the social

²⁰⁵ ‘Les instruments de la *praxis* n’appartiennent pas en propre aux tenants de la *praxis*, aux travailleurs, et c’est évidemment pourquoi la zone d’opacité qui sépare l’homme de lui-même et de la nature fait partie de l’homme et de la nature. Il n’y a pas une nature à retrouver mais à refaire, à reconstruire’, *ibid.*, p. 110.

function of justifying hierarchical social relations as ‘objective’, eternal and fixed, while at the same time, it is quite blind to the fact that this is all it is doing.²⁰⁶

For Vaneigem, this separated thought, with its purely abstract methodology, is therefore the product of hierarchical social relationships and it is a totalising process that seeks to maintain these social separations at all costs. Indeed, in *Traité* Vaneigem argues that capitalist social praxis is itself in some sense shaped by the forms of metaphysics, literally ‘beyond the physical’, which, for him, is the embodiment of alienated thought or ‘la pensée séparée’.²⁰⁷ An important part of this alienated thinking, for Vaneigem, is the erroneous separations and dualisms established by bourgeois society: ‘Et aujourd’hui encore, personne ne peut sous-estimer la dichotomie aberrante entre pensée et action, théorie et pratique, réel et imaginaire ... Ces idées-là sont des forces d’organisation’.²⁰⁸ Vaneigem thereby wishes to bring our attention to the fact that a lot of the separations we take for granted are in fact historical impositions of a hierarchical society. Moreover, Vaneigem says, these myths are deeply dangerous ones: ‘Le monde du mensonge est un monde réel, on y tue et on y est tué, il est préférable de ne pas l’oublier’.²⁰⁹ Vaneigem therefore concludes that far from being no longer a major force in the world, abstract thought has in fact been realised within the very fabric of capitalist society:

On a beau ironiser sur le pourrissement de la philosophie, les philosophes contemporains se retirent avec un sourire entendu derrière leur médiocrité de pensée: ils savent au moins que le monde reste une construction philosophique, un grand débarras idéologique. Nous survivons dans un paysage métaphysique.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ The importance of the utopian socialist tradition of the likes of Fourier to the SI and, arguably Marx, is precisely that it breaks through the limitations of what is thought possible set by this reified thinking.

²⁰⁷ ‘On s’étonne beaucoup trop peu à mon sens de voir le monde emprunter, à certaines époques, les formes de la métaphysique dominante. La croyance au diable et à Dieu, si farfelue soit-elle, fait de l’un et l’autre fantômes une réalité vivante sitôt qu’une collectivité les juge assez présents pour inspirer des textes de lois’, *Traité*, p. 122.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

The almost world-weary language here conveys a sense of frustration with a contemporary discourse that obscures the role of abstraction in the process of capitalist reproduction. Philosophy in some sense, for Vaneigem, turns the world into a ‘débaras idéologique’ or ideological storeroom. It is not only that philosophy obscures reality here, its categories actually shape it in very concrete ways. The separation of human powers, between imagining concrete desires and realising them in practice, is one that exists at every level of reality. In this sense philosophy, itself a social separation, is realised in all of the false oppositions of capitalist society. To some extent Vaneigem is saying, much as Marx in his critique of commodity fetishism, that metaphysics is made material in the very process of contemporary social relationships. As Vaneigem concludes this passage: ‘La médiation abstraite et aliénante qui m’éloigne de moi même est terriblement concrète’.²¹¹

The lack of autonomy that is at the heart of abstract mediation is, Vaneigem argues here, reproduced, or seeks to be, in both the *actions and thoughts* of the alienated subject. In more concrete terms, the factory owner dictates what the subject must manufacture or the king how his ‘subjects’ must serve him. Theologians, academics and philosophers dictate what the subject must think (and she must think that the way things are is the way things must always be, even if this means denying her own feelings of alienation that could change them). The very real existence of specialists of thought only serves to highlight the point that on a social level thought is an abstract mediation. The metaphysical idea that imagination is separate from reality, thought from action, theory from practice, is simply a reflection and justification of a society in which social relationships have made this the case.

²¹¹ Ibid.

Metaphysics is, for Vaneigem, therefore practical in the most abstract and blind way possible. It regards itself as eternal and above human activity, but is itself a product of alienated activity and the hierarchical social relations that it seeks to impose on humanity for all time. It is for this reason that alienating mediation is at one and the same time abstract and yet also so ‘terriblement concrète’.²¹² It prevents human beings from understanding their own relationships and actions in the clear light of day.

However, praxis is not an abstraction but a real concrete activity. Vaneigem realises that alienation can never be all-embracing because it is still a form of concrete mediation performed by real, imaginative and consciously creative people: ‘la médiation ne perd jamais tout à fait contact avec le vécu, elle résiste à l’attraction du champ autoritaire’.²¹³ The closure between alienated objectivity and alienated subjectivity is only ever a provisional one, in constant threat of collapsing due to the consciousness and feelings of alienation it cannot help but produce in each subject. It is this fact that makes revolutionary subjectivity an ever-present possibility.

Vaneigem explicitly associates the mystifying and conditioning role of abstract theoretical and practical mediations in *praxis aliénée* with the theory of fetishism in Marx: ‘Il n’y a pas de communication authentique dans un monde où les fétiches gouvernent la plupart des comportements. Entre les êtres et les choses, l’espace est contrôlé par les médiations aliénantes’.²¹⁴ In the work of Raoul Vaneigem, hierarchical societies are fetishistic societies in the sense that in them the products of human praxis take on the appearance of agency, a human quality. As above, social relationships, produced by human beings through alienated mediation appear as fixed objects beyond their control. Because these abstractions are not seen

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 322.

as the product of human activity, the agency and ‘objectivity’ that human social relationships give them is seen to belong to that abstraction itself.

This process, termed ‘reification’ by Lukàcs, is the logical origin of the abstract categories of hierarchical societies such as God, money, the market, work, art etc. that shape social praxis as incontestable objects but that are simply the alienation of the imaginative and consciously creative dimension of human practice.²¹⁵ As such the credence given to these abstractions channels human praxis and gives them the appearance of agency. In the Middle Ages, for example, plague and war might be interpreted as a punishment from God rather than as the product of human actions that could have been avoided. In contemporary society, there may be more than enough food and housing to end poverty but these resources cannot be allocated directly because of the lack of money. God and money, the prize commodity, are the fetishism in these examples; abstractions that limit and obscure human praxis despite themselves being the product of praxis. Second order mediation, or *praxis aliénée*, is therefore the ontological basis for fetishistic societies; or, to express this differently, where fetishism dominates social life, alienated praxis is the cause.

In the work of Raoul Vaneigem these various aspects of second order mediation—alienation, reification, metaphysics and fetishism—have serious implications for ‘le vécu’ or lived experience. They both attempt to define and replace the reality of actual human life as it is experienced and constantly created:

²¹⁵ Arguably one of the most important critiques that can be aimed at both Vaneigem and Debord is that the importance of ‘value’, that many Marxian scholars (Postone, Kurz, Jappe et al.) now see as central to the work of Marx, was not one of the abstractions they critiqued. Interestingly, Asger Jorn did discuss value in *Critique de la politique économique*, suivie de *La Lutte finale* (Paris, 1960) but his understanding of the subject was limited and was written long before the theory of praxis became central to the group. It should be added, however, that while the SI may have not developed a critique of value, Vaneigem’s understanding of praxis by no means excludes one and was perhaps, indirectly, an influence on the origins of the contemporary critique of the value form.

L'autorité, à son stade ultime, va culminer dans l'union de l'abstrait et du concret. Le pouvoir abstrait déjà comme on guillotine encore. La face du monde éclairée par lui s'ordonne selon une métaphysique du réel; et c'est pain bénit que de voir les fidèles philosophes rempiler à son service avec un grade de technocrate, de sociologue, de spécialiste à tout crin.

La forme pure qui hante l'espace social est le visage discernable de la mort des hommes. Elle est la névrose avant la nécrose, le mal de survie qui s'étend à mesure qu'au vécu se substituent des images, des formes, des objets, que la médiation aliénée transmute le vécu en chose, le *madréporise*.²¹⁶

The use of religious language in this extract once again provides the sense that for Vaneigem capitalist social life is in some way a concretisation of religion in the very fabric of reality. Here authority is identified with God and philosophers, along with other specialists of thought who are presented as its faithful theologians. This is, moreover, a religion founded upon death. Again we see this idea that abstraction is a lethal act. In a world defined by alienation at all levels the best way to express the essence of this society, for Vaneigem, is simply death. One might say that where for Debord the key relationship is one of spectacle, for Vaneigem, it is even more essentially one of systematic mortification presided over by zealous priests. Indeed, Vaneigem employs the curious term '*madréporise*', a neologism of the Symbolist poet Jules Lafargue,²¹⁷ which comes from the noun *madrépore*, a type of rocky coral. The idea is that humanity is in a certain sense being turned to living stone. The literary turn is clearly designed to convey the feeling of a humanity that is being transformed into something alien to its essence.

In fetishistic societies, the reality of lived experience or the '*vécu*' is alienation. The subject, if it grasps its own alienation and, with it, an ability to imagine and create an alternative '*vécu*' or '*mode d'emploi de la vie*', is capable of

²¹⁶ *Traité*, p. 127-128.

²¹⁷ 'Ma vie est toujours affreusement la même. J'entre dans une période d'apathie, c'est pourquoi je me suis payé un néologisme: je '*madréporise*', Jules Lafargue, letter to Théophile Ysaye, June 1885, in *Œuvres complètes, tome II* (Lausanne: Editions l'Age d'Homme, 1995), p. 766. No doubt Vaneigem was attracted by the term for its conveyance of a certain kind of boredom.

abolishing fetishistic social relations. For second order mediation to work then, even provisionally, it must fill social life and, by extension, social consciousness with abstract mediations that seek to channel all of human consciousness and, therefore, the forms human practice takes, with a total absence of any authentic concrete mediation that would overcome it. The 'vécu' or lived experience of alienation is simply denied (e.g. claims that the proletariat no longer exists or that work is edifying). Or, far more subtly, what critical consciousness that arises from alienation exists is condemned to incoherence due to the abstractions that fragment any total critique of contemporary social relations.

The artistic avant-garde continued to think in terms of 'art' and 'aesthetics', not seeing these as a product of contemporary social relations that needed to be abolished in order to realise the very free creativity they desired. The left, likewise, never challenged 'work', 'money', 'politics', 'the commodity' etc. and so was condemned to simply reproduce the very capitalist social relations that created the alienation which gave the movement its original impetus and strength. This reification of the 'vécu', of the real lived experience of alienation and of the imaginative possibility of another way of life, therefore defines what Vaneigem means by the inauthentic, be it an idea, a movement or a way of life.

It is also the context in which the Situationist notion of an inauthentic desire should be understood.²¹⁸ The SI do not argue that the subject does not in a sense actually desire the happiness associated with buying a commodity. Rather, the fact that the realisation of that desire takes the form of a commodity, an abstract social form *specific to capitalism*, is a reification of that desire precisely because it takes the

²¹⁸ 'L'architecture existe réellement, comme le coca-cola: c'est une production enrobée d'idéologie mais réelle, satisfaisant faussement un besoin faussé', Raoul Vaneigem and Attila Kotányi, 'Programme élémentaire du bureau d'urbanisme unitaire' in *Internationale situationniste*, 6 (August 1961), p. 16.

form of an abstraction. As such, the desire for a prized commodity is an alienation of the desire for free objectification of desires within liberated praxis, which can take *any form*.²¹⁹ In capitalism, desires must always be realised as an alienation; that is to say, as a specific abstract social form, the commodity (hence money is the highest form of commodity fetishism because it purchases all other commodities). Likewise, in feudal society, where God is the dominant reified social form, inauthentic desires might be those mediated by the Church, a desire for heavenly favour that brings absolution, safety and a paradise after death.

Inauthentic desires are therefore inauthentic because if realised within fetishistic social relations they are simply alienations of the demands of the subject that arise from the ‘vécu’. The purchase of a widescreen TV will never abolish the subject’s lived unhappiness because the social production of commodities—again, a social form specific, or rather central, to the totality of the historical social relations termed capitalism—is the very cause of that unhappiness in the first place. It is therefore possible, within the strict context of reification, to talk meaningfully about authentic and inauthentic desires. An authentic desire would be one realised directly by the subject rather than one mediated by (concrete-) abstract social categories such as the commodity and God (depending on the historical social relations discussed); the social forms would be transparent, that is to say, directly under the conscious control of free agents.

The two orders of mediation explained above, *praxis* and *praxis aliénée*, are the context in which the theory and practice of class struggle should be understood in the work of Raoul Vaneigem. For Raoul Vaneigem—and arguably for Marx—the class

²¹⁹ ‘On remplace la nécessité de boire par celle de boire coca-cola’, Raoul Vaneigem, ‘Commentaires contre l’urbanisme’ in *Internationale situationniste*, 6 (August 1961), p. 34.

struggle is a struggle by alienated subjectivities to abolish second order mediation and, in so doing, liberate first order mediation. The working class, as the most dispossessed creatively in thought and practice—that is to say, the most alienated emotionally, consciously, imaginatively, ‘materially’—,²²⁰ embody the potential of a privileged locus around which a consciousness capable of grasping the inhumanity of *praxis aliénée*, of second order mediation, can be formed. That is to say, the emergence of revolutionary consciousness is neither inevitable nor limited to the working class.

It should also be stressed that the potential revolutionary consciousness of the working class is only revolutionary according to the extent to which it considers itself in purely negative terms when faced with the possibilities of free consciously creative practice. In contrast, any positive valorisation of the existence of the working class as such simply reinforces their existence as alienated subjects and aids the reproduction of capital. The working class, for Vaneigem, must therefore abolish itself if it is to be revolutionary in any meaningful sense. If this collective consciousness emerges as a social force in history, it will be the negation of a life reduced to the reproduction of fetishistic social forms and it will embody the positive desire for an existence beyond this. As such the revolutionary working class, as well as those subjectivities of other classes that have experienced enough alienation to associate their own cause with that of the workers, is the bearer of both a negative project that is itself a positive, the abolition of fetishistic/hierarchical social relations, and a positive project, the establishment of a society based on free human praxis, that is to say, first order mediation.

²²⁰ Obviously consciousness, imaginations, emotions etc. are just as material as the products of human labour. Here I mean that workers are the poorest, in the sense of not having enough to eat or a roof over their head.

Interpretations of Vaneigem that situate him in a traditional Leftist paradigm where class struggle is a battle within capitalist social relations and not *against and beyond* those social relations—including the very (concrete-) abstractions through which they function (work, money, the commodity, value, the state, art, politics etc.)—are simply wrong. Class struggle, for Vaneigem, is a very real battle between humanity and inhumanity, creativity and labour, happiness and unhappiness, desire and false desire, reality and metaphysics, concrete and abstract, life and death, *praxis* and *praxis aliénée*. It is a struggle fought by real people, individually and collectively, in real historical circumstances at every moment of every day.

It is this final point where the notion of ‘la vie quotidienne’ or everyday life becomes important to Raoul Vaneigem. As stated above, *praxis*, for Vaneigem, is a social and individual totality that defines human existence. As such any and every aspect of life, the entirety of the reality created through humanity’s consciously creative activity, is at issue. The problem of alienation, of abstract mediation, is not one that faces people only in the workplace or in consumption but rather encompasses all experience, all reality. Everyday life, the concrete experiences of people as they go through their quotidian activities—taking the metro, shopping, conversation, work, watching television, family life etc.—is as much defined by social *praxis*, and, in fetishistic society, therefore alienation, as any other part of the totality. Second order mediation, for Vaneigem, invades our lives in all manner of roles, practices, thoughts and emotions that people undergo everyday. The abolition of second order mediation, the negative project, and the realisation of first order mediation, the positive, therefore

offers the real possibility of a total transformation of human reality and reveals our present one as inhuman.²²¹

Significantly, the realisation of first order mediation, this positive project, is exactly what has so often been vilified by critics of Raoul Vaneigem as ‘idealist’, ‘Romantic’ and ‘utopian’. From his perspective on Marx, however, the real possibility of such a fundamental metamorphosis of human experience is based on and inspired by the very basis of Marxian critique.

Radical Subjectivity and Revolutionary Praxis

The theory of praxis that has been presented above explains the causes of fetishistic social relations and makes it clear that completely different ones are possible. With this established we now turn to a slightly different question. What constitutes *revolutionary* praxis for Raoul Vaneigem? If capitalist society embodies an alienation of the human essence and a society beyond this offers the possibility of its realisation, there must be some theory as to how humanity will bridge the gap. This relates very closely to what the point of an organisation like the Situationist International or of simply writing a work of critical theory actually is. Commensurately, this also leads one to the question of exactly where other revolutionary movements and groups have gone wrong. The relationship between theory and practice is therefore key to the problem of human emancipation.

In *Traité* Vaneigem seeks to resolve these issues by turning once again to the work of Karl Marx. He specifically cites one of the most famous passages from Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1844) that defines the meaning of

²²¹ ‘Ceux qui parlent de révolution et de lutte de classes sans se référer explicitement à la vie quotidienne, sans comprendre ce qu’il y a de subversif dans l’amour et de positif dans le refus des contraintes, ceux-là ont dans la bouche un cadavre’, *Traité*, p. 32.

‘radical theory’ and why it can be an effective material force.²²² Vaneigem offers his own interpretation of these lines in *Traité*, which describes both the counter-revolutionary nature of traditional Marxist theory and what, in contrast, makes revolutionary theory genuinely radical. The subject, Vaneigem states, is part of reality, it is, moreover, in a constant state of conscious creation and experience of the world. As such, the thoughts, feelings and ideas that arise in the subject are those that develop as part of the ‘vécu’. Because this lived experience of everyday life is itself the product of social relations created by subjectivity, human beings have immediate (in the sense of concrete) access to those social relations. In other words, ‘alienation’ and hierarchy are lived experiences by people in fetishistic societies. The theory of alienation, or any radical theory, is for this reason a theoretical discovery, or reasoning out, of a reality directly grasped in the unhappiness, isolation and suffering of the masses: ‘la théorie radicale pénètre les masses parce qu’elle en est d’abord l’émanation’.²²³ Radical theory is therefore something that arises out of spontaneous critiques of capitalism based in the everyday experiences of the masses.²²⁴ Equally, however, it is the role of radical theory to ensure that the practical power of the masses can be fully realised: ‘elle a pour mission d’en assurer la force de frappe’.²²⁵ Radical theory, for Vaneigem, thus emerges from individual experience and reaches others through a shared human desire for self-realisation.²²⁶ For Vaneigem, Marx is referring explicitly to the theory of praxis: the ‘racine de l’homme’ is subjectivity in mediation with the world.

²²² ‘La théorie devient force matérielle lorsqu’elle pénètre les masses. La théorie est capable de pénétrer les masses dès qu’elle fait des démonstrations *ad hominem* et elle fait des démonstrations *ad hominem* dès qu’elle devient radicale. Etre radical, c’est prendre les choses par la racine. Et la racine de l’homme, c’est l’homme lui-même’, Karl Marx cited in *Traité*, p. 129.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Vaneigem describes it as ‘dépositaire d’une créativité spontanée’, *ibid.*

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ ‘La théorie radicale émane de l’individu, de l’être en tant que sujet; elle pénètre les masses par ce qu’il y a de plus créatif dans chacun, par la subjectivité, par la volonté de réalisation’, *ibid.*, p. 130.

The role of theory is not, therefore, to sit outside everyday experiences but to grasp them and to give them back to the subject with more coherence. It cannot sit over and above the subject seeking to overcome alienation. It cannot direct its action. Rather, it must come from the alienated subject. That is to say, alienation cannot be overcome by alienated thought, by party leaders, bureaucrats, union bosses or academics directing human actions. Authentically radical theory, one form of the consciously creative dimension of human practice, is capable of becoming a ‘force matérielle’ because it is the product of the real, practical lived experiences and desires of alienated subjects in their daily lives. Radical theory is concrete thought that seeks its own conscious realisation in practice. It stands and falls on how accurately it addresses the concerns of the masses and is useful to them in a battle against alienation they wage autonomously.

Vaneigem contrasts this with the abstract thought of ‘la pensée séparée’, the ideas created by leaders within a hierarchical structure, which, he argues, turns theory, the product of lived alienation, into a force arrayed against the alienated. Religion, art, philosophy, traditional Marxist theory and representative democracy—all the different forms alienated thought takes—are, for Vaneigem, like the tool, referred to above, which has been turned against its user. These are thoughts by men that make an argument against mankind: ‘un argument *ad hominem* contre l’homme lui-même’.²²⁷ The power of ideology to provisionally grip the masses is based on the fact that it too draws on the very lived alienation that it creates, offering an illusory explanation that reinforces the reproduction of its own social origins. Radical theory, however, is able to grasp the true nature of ideology as the latter reveals its fetishistic character through the alienation it inevitably causes in the subject. In turn, radical theory offers

²²⁷ Ibid.

the alienated subject the possibility of an emancipation of human creativity: ‘Elle est la technique révolutionnaire au service de la poésie’.²²⁸

Although for the most part he treats theory as a separate category, Vaneigem does not, of course, see it as the only source of consciously creative practice. For Vaneigem, liberating praxis extends to any number of concrete mediations and, in particular, to language itself. Indeed, at one point in *Traité* Vaneigem explicitly conflates revolutionary theory with radical poetry:

cependant, les hommes se servent aussi des mots et de signes pour tenter de parfaire leurs gestes interrompus. Et parce qu’ils le font, il existe un langage poétique; un langage du vécu qui, pour moi, se confond avec la théorie radicale, avec la théorie pénétrant les masses, devenant force matérielle.²²⁹

Vaneigem is saying here that radical poetry is the product of incomplete gestures of dis-alienation that have been extended into language. Unable to act in a way that instantly transforms the totality, the poet or theorist perfects the conscious aspect of revolutionary practice through writing. It is through language, centrally, that effective, liberating praxis is made possible and the need for such practice is revealed on a historical level: ‘Dans le langage d’une époque, on peut suivre à la trace la révolution totale, inaccomplie et toujours imminente’.²³⁰ Vaneigem argues that it is not only theory that is necessary to bring about effective, unified revolutionary praxis but all spaces in which human imagination and experience can be communicated. Radical poetry, as the textual realm that seeks to express emotion and desire—perhaps even the incommunicable—as well as ideas, merges with theory because it too is ultimately the product of concrete, lived experiences. Both theory and poetry, in this sense, therefore play a part in the development of effective human action of dis-alienation,

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 129.

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

²³⁰ ‘Banalités (II)’, p. 278.

breaking through abstract thought: ‘Quand un poème de Mallarmé apparaîtra comme seule explication d’un acte de révolte, alors il sera permis de parler sans ambiguïté de poésie et révolution’.²³¹

For Vaneigem it is important that revolutionary poetry and theory not be confused with the reifications with which they are associated: poets and theorists. The SI is not a Leninist vanguard that seeks to direct the masses. On the contrary Situationist praxis is an offering to the alienated. Its writing acts as a critical kernel through which the everyday experiences of people, otherwise fragmented by the divisions of alienating mediation, are returned in a more unified, theoretical form. Revolutionary theory and poetry is only revolutionary by virtue of its accurately reflecting the spontaneous, directly lived, experience of the mass of people and, most importantly, only if the masses spontaneously find it useful to their own realisation. That is, if they control theory and poetry themselves: ‘Partout se vérifie la loi ‘il n’est pas une arme de ta volonté individuelle qui, maniée par d’autres, ne se retourne aussitôt contre toi’’.²³² Again, we see in the heart of the theory of Vaneigem the repetition of this notion that mediation can escape the control of human beings. It is this essential problem that Vaneigem seeks to combat in his definition of revolutionary praxis. Key to this is his insistence that individuals themselves should constantly make the concrete reality of their everyday lives the ultimate test of radical theory.²³³

These points should serve to underline the fact that Vaneigem is not interested in the creation of a speculative philosophical critique of capitalist society but in

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid., p. 29.

²³³ ‘Si quelqu’un dit ou écrit qu’il convient désormais de fonder la raison pratique sur les droits de l’individu et de l’individu seulement, il se condamne dans son propos s’il n’incite aussitôt son interlocuteur à fonder par lui-même la preuve de ce qu’il vient d’avancer. Or une telle preuve ne peut être que vécue, saisie, par l’intérieur. C’est pourquoi il n’est rien dans les notes qui suivent qui ne doive être éprouvé et corrigé par l’expérience immédiate de chacun’, *ibid.*, p. 29.

providing a coherent understanding that will form the basis of practice to overcome it as a totality. As such, it has to be rooted within the real lived experiences of its writer and its readers. Vaneigem is very explicit here that readers should not just swallow his arguments whole but judge them according to their own actual immediate experience. In a sense this one passage contains the totality of his argument. Revolutionary praxis can only emerge out of the 'vécu' of the individual within the social totality and must change and respond accordingly. Any 'revolutionary' or 'progressive' theory or practice that is not based in this individual desire for self-realisation of the needs that arise from lived experience is an argument against the autonomy of the subject, against praxis, against creativity, against humanity.

Vaneigem is above all concerned in these passages to distinguish his own theories from ideology. Ideologies are reifications of human praxis that are used to justify inhumanity; that is, hierarchical social constraints on human praxis. This applies to work and art, as discussed above, but even more importantly, in this case, to false ideas of human liberation: 'Le triple écrasement de la Commune, du Mouvement spartakiste et de Cronstadt-la-Rouge (1921) a montré une fois pour toutes les autres à quel bain de sang menaient trois idéologies de la liberté: le libéralisme, le socialisme, le bolchevisme'.²³⁴ If revolutionary theory is just an abstraction, and not a practical tool used by people to liberate themselves, it can always be used as a justification for any kind of inhumanity.

However, the issue of individual and collective realisation raises the problem of how any theory of human liberation can avoid falling into the same authoritarian role in human history when it pretends to embody the interests of 'humanity' as a

²³⁴Ibid., p. 29.

whole.²³⁵ It is this problematic that takes Raoul Vaneigem towards his concept of ‘la subjectivité radicale’ that, while extremely well-known, is rarely, if ever, understood. Indeed, the theory of radical subjectivity is actually a very specific idea in the work of Raoul Vaneigem. Now that we have established his definition of the theory of praxis it is easier to grasp the exact meaning of this term.

Vaneigem defines the radical subject very straightforwardly as ‘la conscience que tous les hommes obéissent à une même volonté de réalisation authentique, et que leur subjectivité se renforce de cette volonté subjective perçue chez les autres’.²³⁶ He goes on to restate the theory later on in the text: ‘toutes les subjectivités diffèrent entre elles et présentent cependant une identité dans leur volonté de réalisation intégrale’.²³⁷ There are several ways we must think about this definition in the light of what has previously been discussed. With the term ‘réalisation authentique’ we can see that Vaneigem is repeating his assertion that the human essence is praxis or first order mediation. The nature of praxis, in its essential form, is such that it requires the *freedom* to *consciously* create ourselves and the world around us according to our individual concrete needs and desires. This means that although all of us are different we still require the same fundamental freedom to realise ourselves. It is crucial, for Vaneigem, that as social animals this freedom is necessarily dependent on a *collective* will to individual realisation.²³⁸ As such, with his notion of radical subjectivity, Vaneigem is arguing that there is a fundamental point of solidarity or interest at the root of mankind that stands in opposition to any system that prevents human beings, individually and collectively, from realising their concrete needs and desires. In more Hegelian terms, our subjectivity can only freely objectify itself with the help of other

²³⁵ These debates actually go back as far as Max Stirner and it is no accident that Vaneigem is an avid reader of both Stirner and Marx.

²³⁶ *Traité*, p. 253.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

²³⁸ ‘On ne se sauve pas seul, on ne se réalise pas isolément’, *ibid.*, p. 317.

subjects freely objectifying themselves. The radical subject is therefore *a state of knowledge* or consciousness that recognises the commonality of our drive to individual self-realisation and that understands that the combined will to realise this drive is the requirement of collective emancipation.

Vaneigem is very clear that all human beings have this urge to realise their essence of conscious creation, of praxis, whether they are conscious of it or not.²³⁹ A subject is only radical, for Vaneigem, to the extent that it consciously grasps this fact. That is to say, in order to be radical the subject must become conscious of what it is essentially. Commensurately, the opposite is true, the counter-revolutionary or fetishistic subject is *not* radical to the extent that it is unconscious of its own essential character. Vaneigem expresses this duality neatly by pointing out that just as power is essentially the same though it takes many different forms, so too, conversely, are subjects.²⁴⁰ The question remains, however, as to how human beings can access this understanding. Vaneigem suggests that it is a case of making abstraction serve human beings rather making human beings serve abstraction.²⁴¹ This means, once again, making lived experience, the *vécu*, the most concrete possible immediate reality, the source of knowledge. In this way, Vaneigem argues, human beings will discover that *human* creativity in its infinite concrete forms can be emancipated in thought and

²³⁹ 'Il existe une racine commune à toutes les subjectivités uniques et irréductibles: la volonté de se réaliser en transformant le monde, la volonté de vivre toutes les sensations, toutes les expériences, tous les possibles. A différents degrés de conscience et de résolution, elle est présente en chaque homme', Ibid., p. 317. This is in fact a *détournement* of Stefan Zweig's description of the *démon* in his biography of Kleist, Hölderlin and Nietzsche that Vaneigem tells us was a major influence on his early development, see Vaneigem, *Le Chevalier*, p. 211. Cf. 'Le démon, c'est le ferment qui met nos âmes en effervescence, qui nous invite aux expériences dangereuses, à tous les excès, à toutes les extases', Stefan Zweig, trans. Alzir Helle, *Le Combat avec le démon* [1929] (Paris : Le Livre de poche, 2009), p. 9. That Vaneigem is thinking of Kleist here gives weight to the argument, given below, that his notion of *volonté de vivre* draws on aspects of German Romanticism.

²⁴⁰ 'Toutes les formes de pouvoir hiérarchisé diffèrent entre elles et présentent cependant une identité dans leurs fonctions oppressives. De même toutes les subjectivités diffèrent entre elles et présentent cependant une identité dans leur volonté de réalisation intégrale. C'est à ce titre qu'il convient de parler d'une véritable 'subjectivité radicale'', *Traité*, p. 317.

²⁴¹ 'Les abstractions, les notions qui nous dirigent, il convient désormais de les ramener à leur source, à l'expérience vécue, non pour les justifier, mais pour les corriger au contraire, pour les inverser, les rendre au vécu dont elles sont issues et dont elles n'auraient jamais dû sortir!', *ibid.*, p. 253.

practice. What Vaneigem means practically is that we should take note of how we actually feel about our everyday lives and what this tells us about our true desires. Ultimately all of our thought and actions essentially come down to attempts to consciously realise some subjective desire or other that arises out of lived experience. These lived experiences and desires have an objectivity because they arise out of an alienating social praxis experienced by all, and, at the same time, they are therefore shared by other human beings. A prime example would be the desire to not work. Just as he seeks to do in *Traité* therefore Vaneigem is saying that it is our concrete subjective desires that will have to form the basis for a non-hierarchical society and emancipation from current domination.²⁴² Vaneigem makes this explicit when he defines ‘la racine de l’homme’ as subjectivity in a *détournement* of the famous passage by Marx from the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* cited above.²⁴³

The essential thrust of the theory of radical subjectivity is therefore that human emancipation must be based on this shared desire for mutual realisation. This realisation can only become fully conscious once human beings, individually and collectively, come to take note of their own subjectivity in all its concrete reality.²⁴⁴ The material force of theory depends on the extent to which a united movement can be established on the basis of this shared desire and contain the many different individual expressions of it.²⁴⁵ Vaneigem is therefore a ‘radical subject’ by his own standards as he is conscious of this will to individual realisation within himself and,

²⁴² ‘C’est à cette condition que les hommes reconnaîtront sous peu que leur créativité individuelle ne se distingue pas de la créativité universelle. Il n’y a pas d’autorité en dehors de ma propre expérience vécue; c’est ce que chacun doit prouver à tous’, *ibid.*, p. 253.

²⁴³ ‘Seule une théorie radicale peut conférer à l’individu des droits imprescriptibles sur le milieu et les circonstances. La théorie radicale saisit les hommes à la racine et la racine des hommes, c’est leur subjectivité—cette zone irréductible qu’ils possèdent en commun’, *ibid.*, p. 317.

²⁴⁴ ‘Cette façon de partir de soi et de rayonner, moins vers les autres que vers ce que l’on découvre de soi en eux, donne à la spontanéité créatrice une importance stratégique semblable à celle d’une base de lancement’, *Ibid.*, p. 253.

²⁴⁵ ‘Son efficacité tient évidemment à l’unité collective qu’elle atteindra sans perdre sa multiplicité’, *ibid.*, p. 317.

by extension, in all mankind. The exact nature of this will or *volonté* towards realisation that Vaneigem says forms the basis of radical subjectivity is, however, in need of further exploration for it is perhaps the most central aspect of his development of the theory of praxis in his critical perspective.

The Will as Subject

Where radical subjectivity has been misunderstood, the Will, or *la volonté*, is a key concept in the work of Raoul Vaneigem that has received even less critical attention. As will become clear, *la volonté* can only be properly understood within the context of the theory of praxis developed above. In his later work Raoul Vaneigem moves away from Marxian language to develop or rather affirm a new terminology that is his own. *La volonté*, although originating in *Traité*, is one of the most crucial terms and the context of praxis is absolute. As the term praxis is largely absent from the later work, the examination of the Will in *Traité* also provides evidence for the ways in which praxis is subsumed into this new terminology while still underpinning it.

The Will, as Vaneigem uses the term, originates in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, as exemplified in his major philosophical work *The World as Will and Representation* (1818). In essence, Schopenhauer was reacting to the limits on metaphysical knowledge established by Kant. Our understanding of reality, Kant argued, is always limited by the categories that our rational mind imposes on sensory perception. Everything that we know is therefore purely a mental representation of an underlying reality that we can never access.

In opposition to Kant, Schopenhauer (significantly the first western philosopher to experiment with meditation) pointed out that humanity actually

possesses two forms of perception: a representation of reality mediated by the categories of mind and an immediate inner experience of the body. This inner experience is *a posteriori* knowledge because it has no notions; it just *is*. Through an examination of inner experience human beings can uncover the reality of the world: ‘c’est en partant de nous-mêmes qu’il faut chercher à comprendre la Nature, et non pas inversement chercher la connaissance de nous-mêmes dans celle de la nature’.²⁴⁶ It is this inner experience, the underlying reality of the world, that Schopenhauer calls Will.²⁴⁷

In examining the Will, Schopenhauer concludes that humanity is essentially striving and desiring from within. He calls the Will the Will to Live or *Volonté de Vivre* because reality is defined by the desire to grow and expand. He explicitly associates the Will to Live with sexuality and the general drive to reproduce. Moreover, the Will is more often than not subliminal. Individuals may rationalise their actions but are in actual fact moved by unconscious drives.²⁴⁸ An accurate knowledge or representation of reality would therefore reflect the Will or sensual experience that drives human beings.²⁴⁹ By implication humanity is therefore part of Nature but also distinct from it in being conscious of its Will. Schopenhauer, however, saw nothing good in his discovery of the Will to Live. Rather it filled him

²⁴⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, trans. A. Burdeau, *Le monde comme volonté et représentation, tome 3* [1819] (Paris : Félix Alcan, 1909), p. 8.

²⁴⁷ N.B. The similarities between this notion of the Will in Schopenhauer and the *vécu* or authentic in Vaneigem are immediately apparent.

²⁴⁸ Schopenhauer is sometimes attributed as the originator of aspects of Darwinism and the Freudian subconscious.

²⁴⁹ A singularly interesting *détournement* by Guy Debord suggests the direct influence of Schopenhauer on the SI. The title of the fourth chapter of *La Société du Spectacle* is ‘Le Prolétariat comme sujet et comme représentation’. The obvious implication is that Debord is developing a *détournement* of the argument of Schopenhauer in this chapter. The proletariat has historically been caught in the Kantian limitation placed on reality (i.e. trapped in the vulgar materialism of Marxism theoretically and institutionally). Only by uniting the Will (explicitly associated with subjectivity) with its own representation or idea of itself can it realise its historic role of abolishing capitalism. This use of Schopenhauer seems to originate in the work of Raoul Vaneigem and is not original to Debord. It suggests that Debord is drawing on his intellectual relationship with Vaneigem in the central chapter of his major work.

with a deep pessimism because humanity is condemned to desires that can never be finally fulfilled and is forced to strive pointlessly with no final goal.

Nietzsche turns the pessimism of Schopenhauer on its head. The Will for Nietzsche is to be celebrated and pursued as the very essence of life. In his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche associated the Will with the Greek worship of the god Dionysus and Representation with Apollo. As such Nietzsche sees the Will as a force of creation that in its most concrete form is close to intoxication and disorder. Representation, in contrast, gives shape to the Will in abstract form. The important shift, however, is to turn the Will into the source of passionate experience that forms the basis of human creative powers. Creativity emerges from the Will in the form of desires and passions that push Man to action. Although Nietzsche later moved away from many of the arguments put forward in *The Birth of Tragedy* the centrality of the Will is continued in his mature philosophy.

Nietzsche was concerned with the way in which certain societies encouraged or denied the essential creative powers or Will of humanity. His approach to Representation, our values, ideas and reasons, was based in a practical desire to realise the Will, our passions, desires and needs. Nineteenth-century bourgeois German society with its nationalism, Christianity and family values embodied a denial of the sensual consciousness and its realisation that Nietzsche called for. At the same time, the Will was a source of opposition to this society. The individual should strive to overcome social constraints placed on the Will and live according to those values the individual best felt realised it.²⁵⁰ Those who achieved this were the Masters, those who let their Will be constrained were the Slaves.

²⁵⁰ It is no accident that Nietzsche was a major influence on the individualist anarchists of the early twentieth century. Today we tend to think of Nietzsche with reference to Nazism but for the Situationists it is primarily this earlier strands of Nietzschean influence on which they are drawing. Parry provides a summary of illegalist readings of Nietzsche and Stirner that, evidently drawing on

The problem with the materialism of Nietzsche, for Vaneigem, was that he accepted hierarchy as trans-historical: ‘Nietzsche consacre la permanence du monde hiérarchisé, où la volonté de vivre se condamne à n’être jamais que volonté de puissance’.²⁵¹ Instead of seeing the struggle of subjectivity or the Will in terms of antagonistic social relationships, and therefore the possibility of social relations that realised the Will or subjectivity, he envisioned it as a struggle between individual wills to dominate. Nietzsche therefore turns the Will to Live into the Will to Power. For Nietzsche, there will always be masters and slaves, not, as Vaneigem would later write referring to Nietzsche in *Traité*, ‘Maîtres sans esclaves’.²⁵²

In the work of Raoul Vaneigem, and following his theory of praxis, subjectivity is not an empty category but rather one that should be conceived of as concretely as possible for each individual and for each society. As in his work on Ducasse, Vaneigem is interested in the whole subject, its psychology, consciousness, attitudes, imagination, knowledge, lived experiences, emotions, ideas, passions, desires, drives etc.²⁵³ For Vaneigem these various aspects of a person form a whole that is not irreducible to any such fragmentation. Moreover, subjectivity (all of it) is a part of physical reality and arises from real activity in the world. Human beings are therefore subjective-objective creatures. The move towards using the language of *la volonté* or Will is a way of talking about subjectivity in praxis that allows Vaneigem to synthesise all the infinite richness of the consciously creative subject in its dialectical relationship with the objective.

Vaneigem, he terms a form of ‘radical subjectivity’, see Richard Parry, *The Bonnot Gang* (London: Rebel Press, 1987), pp. 15-19,

²⁵¹ *Traité*, p. 310.

²⁵² This is the title of chapter 21 of *Traité*.

²⁵³ Vaneigem’s work on Isidore Ducasse, Le Comte de Lautréamont, is discussed on page 152-161 of the current work.

Vaneigem identifies two forms that the Will can take, *la volonté de vivre* and *la volonté de puissance*. These two versions of the Will Vaneigem associates with the subjectivity that emerges out of ‘first’ and ‘second’ order mediation respectively. In a sense, *la volonté de vivre* is simply the subject’s drive to realise itself in nature through practice. Vaneigem makes this link to praxis fairly explicit: ‘Pas une technique, pas une pensée dont le premier mouvement n’obéisse pas à une volonté de vivre’.²⁵⁴ As such the *volonté de vivre* is trans-historical and provides the original impetus behind all action, as the embodiment of praxis, in all societies. It is therefore an abstract category of thought applied to what, Vaneigem argues, fundamentally drives all of the different human practices in changing historical conditions.

In a certain sense then, *la volonté de vivre* is simply subjectivity in its dialectical relationship with objectivity. At the same time, this subjectivity in movement is what we are as human beings and therefore *la volonté de vivre* is our ideas, our emotions, our passions, and so on. Vaneigem also suggests that *la volonté de vivre*, in its most intense form, can be felt simply as a passion for changing the world: ‘la volonté de se réaliser en transformant le monde, la volonté de vivre toutes les sensations, toutes les expériences, tous les possibles’.²⁵⁵ It is the impetus that drives the dialectical movement of reality. Once it has become better understood by the subject, it takes, as above, the form of ‘la subjectivité radicale’.

The reason why the past is able to speak to the present, even though conditions have changed, is because *la volonté de vivre* is present throughout human history as the desire for unrestrained self-realisation. The Movement of the Free Spirit embodies such an example, following Vaneigem, of people who had a certain

²⁵⁴ *Traité*, p. 221.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

conception of freeing *la volonté de vivre* from the fetishistic constraints of religion.²⁵⁶

Equally, Fourier, Marx, Ducasse and all of the people and movements that the Situationists and Surrealists bring together are seen by Vaneigem to embody a greater or lesser degree of awareness of *la volonté de vivre* (and, therefore, of human praxis).

In fetishistic societies, those where hierarchical social relations exist, *la volonté de vivre*, as first order mediation, is still what drives the subjective-objective dialectical movement but it is perverted by alienation. Within fetishistic social relations, Vaneigem argues, *la volonté de vivre* is constrained, by the actual organisation of life under conditions of hierarchy. This is what, he asserts, creates *la volonté de puissance*: ‘C’est la passion de créer et de se créer, emprisonnée dans le système hiérarchique, condamné à faire tourner les meules de la répression et de l’apparence’.²⁵⁷ For Vaneigem the Will to Power is therefore a movement of self-realisation that has been unable to realise itself freely as part of a society based in conscious praxis: ‘La volonté de puissance est le projet de réalisation falsifié, coupé de la participation et de la communication’.²⁵⁸ The result is that human beings still have passions, desires and needs but they now take a form shaped by power, that it is to say by the hierarchical structures of society: ‘Prestige de l’humiliation, autorité et soumission, voilà le pas de manœuvre de la volonté de puissance’.²⁵⁹ Fetishistic society is still created by living human beings with a *volonté de vivre*, which in its essential liberated form now only exists on a social level as a possibility, but it is the Will to Power that defines the passions of capitalist subjects. It is clear from the

²⁵⁶ The Movement of the Free Spirit was a Medieval Christian heresy that according to Vaneigem, rejected guilt, sacrifice and suffering in favour of self-fulfilment in this life. The most important texts by Vaneigem on this subject are his *Le Mouvement du Libre-Esprit* and *La Résistance au christianisme*. For a more detailed account of Vaneigem’s interest in the movement see pages 261-265 of the current work.

²⁵⁷ *Traité*, p. 309.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

description of *la volonté de puissance*, which Vaneigem provides here, that we are meant to identify it with second order mediation praxis, with alienation and inauthenticity.

In the concept of *la volonté de vivre* or the Will to Live and *la volonté de puissance* or the Will to Power, Vaneigem has a powerful explanation of both what is possible in a non-hierarchical society but also what drives capitalist subjects to not only live against their essence but to even revel in their inhumanity. The desire to dominate, to cause pain, to murder, to submit, to embody a role, to bully and kill for pleasure etc., both passive and active positioning of the self in a hierarchy, originate from a *volonté de vivre* that has been constrained, twisted and transformed into its opposite. Inhumanity is only a humanity perverted by the mediation of power from its desire for self-realisation. Or rather, *la volonté de puissance* is what happens to a subject whose *volonté de vivre* is placed or *formed* under hierarchical constraints. Ironically, this means that even the most negative and destructive products of the subject are expressions of a *volonté de vivre*, our humanity, but expressed through constraint, as inhumanity.

Fetishistic forms of self are able to take over the subject precisely because they are based essentially on a *volonté de vivre* constrained by the fundamental structures of a fetishistic society: the objective and the subjective reflect each other as two movements in the same dialectical process of human being but, under these conditions, the subject is as fetishistic as the forms of the objective world in which it lives. Each fetish, Vaneigem argues, be it that of the commodity, God or otherwise, contains an element of an alienated *volonté de vivre*. This is particular obvious for Vaneigem in the way that ideology functions—be it Fascism, Liberalism, Communism, Christianity or any other—, he states that this is exactly from where

these ideas draws their strength.²⁶⁰ What is perhaps most disturbing about the concept of the Will that Vaneigem develops here is that even the most inhuman concepts and movements are essentially the product of an original positive impulse but one that is unconscious of its true self and therefore beyond its control, turning into its exact opposite. In other words, the existence of *la volonté de puissance* tells us that the logic of fetishism now characterises our very selves.

For Vaneigem, this tension between *la volonté de vivre* and *la volonté de puissance* in our society is one that each individual struggles with at every moment. This is a central point that spans the entire work of Vaneigem, the problem is not one only posed in certain special moments, rather *la volonté de vivre* is in a state of constant battle. Failure can result as much in resignation and submission as a desire to dominate and dehumanise. Vaneigem therefore sees the liberation of *la volonté de vivre* as the prime goal of revolutionary praxis. It is the project of a subject realising itself in Nature as part of a society where this process of praxis is the conscious heart of communal life. There is no space, however, for *la volonté de puissance* or the *Übermensch* (or, indeed, Maldoror) in this world. Rather, for Vaneigem, it is the realisation of an altogether different kind of human being: ‘le projet de l’homme total, une *volonté de vivre totalement*’.²⁶¹ Here Vaneigem explicitly associates the notion of the *homme total* [*totaler Mensch*] of Marx and Lefebvre with his own *volonté de vivre*. In the later work this subject who freely and consciously creates the world and

²⁶⁰ ‘Et même le fascisme immonde est une volonté de vivre niée, retournée, la chair d’un ongle incarné. Une volonté de vivre devenue volonté de puissance, une volonté de puissance devenue volonté d’obéissance passive, une volonté d’obéissance passive devenue volonté de mort; car céder d’un pouce sur le qualitatif, c’est céder sur la totalité du qualitatif. Brûler le fascisme, soit, mais que la même flamme embrase les idéologies, toutes les idéologies sans exception, et leurs valets’, *ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁶¹ ‘[la jeune génération] rappelle que la raison des luttes passées est ancrée dans le présent des hommes qui les ont menées et que ce présent-là, en dépit des conditions historiques différentes, est aussi le sien. En bref, il y aurait, à la croire, un projet constant qui animerait les courants révolutionnaires radicaux: le projet de l’homme total, une *volonté de vivre totalement* à laquelle Marx le premier aurait su donner une tactique de réalisation scientifique’, *ibid.*, p. 87.

itself is termed ‘le vivant’ (as, for example, in the title of his 1990 book *Adresse aux vivants sur la mort qui les gouverne*).²⁶² The language of life and death that pervades the work of Raoul Vaneigem is meant to reflect the reality of *la volonté de vivre* and *la volonté de puissance* in our everyday lives. Moreover, as we shall see in chapter 4 of the current work, the concept of the Will as praxis and praxis as essence lays the basis for his later considerations of the ‘fear of pleasure’ in the capitalist subject.

The Negative Project

With the fundamental critical perspective of Raoul Vaneigem explained, a new reading of the arguments, themes and language contained within *Traité* is possible. Vaneigem divides *Traité* into two parts ‘La Perspective du pouvoir’ (chapters 1 to 18) and ‘Le Renversement de perspective’ (chapters 19 to 25). In the Introduction to *Traité*, Vaneigem explains that these two parts of his book are meant to reflect the duality of our contemporary struggle.²⁶³ We can think of this in terms of the two moments in the dialectic of revolutionary praxis, the alienated subject that Vaneigem defines as ‘l’homme de la survie’, for reasons discussed below, and the imagination of liberated human subjectivity it gives rise to that can be realised in practice. Revolutionary praxis requires a desire to overcome contemporary social relations

²⁶² Debord also uses this term in *Spectacle* just below his *détournement* of Schopenhauer mentioned above: ‘Le *sujet* de l’histoire ne peut être que le vivant se produisant lui-même, devenant maître et possesseur de son monde qui est l’histoire, et existant comme *conscience de son jeu*’, Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 792. For a more detailed discussion of the *vivant* in the work of Vaneigem see pages 232-235 of the current work.

²⁶³ ‘L’homme de la survie, c’est aussi l’homme unitaire, l’homme du refus global. Il ne se passe pas un instant sans que chacun de nous ne vive contradictoirement, et à tous les degrés de la réalité, le conflit de l’oppression et de la liberté; sans qu’il ne soit bizarrement déformé et comme saisi en même temps selon deux perspectives antagonistes: la perspective du pouvoir et la perspective du dépassement. Consacrées à l’analyse de l’une et de l’autre, les deux parties qui composent le *Traité de savoir-vivre* mériteraient donc d’être abordées non successivement, comme l’exige la lecture, mais simultanément, la description du négatif fondant le projet positif et le projet positif confirmant la négativité. Le meilleur ordre d’un livre, c’est de n’en avoir pas, afin que le lecteur y découvre le sien’, *Traité*, pp. 20-21.

(ironically born of those same social relations) and an idea of what social relations should replace them. To be effective, revolution can neither be purely negative nor purely positive but, rather, these two are aspects of a single dialectical movement of human praxis. In other words, Vaneigem seeks to show that the desire to destroy capitalism is a real one that emerges out of the lived experiences of subjects in capitalism and he imagines the social relations that need to replace it in practice. Only a unity of these dimensions of consciousness required for human praxis can make revolutionary practice effective. Both desire and imagination are required for the subject to realise itself in the objective world.

The first part of *Traité* then, ‘la description du négatif’, is the exposition of the effects of alienated praxis on the subject that gives rise to the desire to abolish alienation. Rather than adopt the objective style typical of bourgeois literature, Vaneigem critiques capitalism self-consciously as a subject-object of alienated praxis (i.e. rejecting the subject-object divide of idealism).²⁶⁴ For Raoul Vaneigem there is no such thing as an objective analysis that can be distinguished from the position of the subject in relation to the object. Our knowledge of ‘objective’ capitalist social relations *is* our day-to-day ‘subjective’ experiences of those social relations. The objective reality of social relations *is* the subjective reality because we are those social relations. Therefore it makes sense to examine one’s own experience because such experience is what constitutes reality. Moreover, Vaneigem, in taking this position in his writing, is staying true to the notion of radical subjectivity because it recognises that subjectivity is both universal and individual. The experiences of alienation and the reflected desire to destroy it are the same experiences of other alienated subjects in society because they arise from the same social relations.

²⁶⁴ ‘j’ai conjecturé que l’analyse de ma propre subjectivité, loin de constituer une démarche isolée, résonnerait en consonance d’autres tentatives similaires et, jouant sur l’air du temps, lui imposerait de quelque manière les modulations du désir’, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

Vaneigem therefore places his own experience of capitalist society under the microscope to reveal its general character. Vaneigem does this by examining the sort of everyday interactions and experiences that capitalist society gives rise to: paying the waiter at a café, the journey to and from work on public transport, shaking hands, daily routine, the social roles we adopt, the fact no one believes politicians, the disappointment of consumption and so on. Vaneigem describes a society where despair, loneliness and boredom are more pervasive than at any other point in human history. His findings are nicely expressed by the titles of these chapters: 'L'humiliation', 'L'isolement', 'La souffrance'. These real aspects of life under capitalism are obscured by the perspective of power that invades subjectivity in the form of ideology that renders the everyday insignificant. The aim of Vaneigem, as the title of his first chapter, 'L'insignifiant signifié', tells us, is to signify the insignificant.

The conclusion that Raoul Vaneigem comes to once the insignificant has been signified, once the experience of everyday life is taken as a totality, is that mankind is suffering from what he calls a 'mal de survie' or survival sickness. The origins of this term are in his theory that fetishistic social relationships demand that the human ability to consciously create the objective be suppressed to serve social relationships ostensibly beyond our control: 'Jusqu'à présent, les hommes n'ont fait que s'adapter à un *système* de transformation du monde'.²⁶⁵ The problem is that such a process is, Vaneigem argues, a total offence to what it means to be human and reduces us to a pseudo-animal state of mere survival.

As was outlined above, what Vaneigem feels distinguishes human beings from animals, what makes them both united with and distinct from Nature, is that they *consciously* transform the world, whereas animals are programmed, as it were, by

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 205.

Nature and cannot therefore be distinguished from it. In hierarchical societies, however, this aspect that separates human beings from Nature is no longer in the control of the subject and is instead mediated by an outside force (class and its abstract social forms of organisation). As such, humanity finds itself in a bizarre situation, at once distinct from Nature due to its conscious creativity but at the same time this conscious creativity is now programmed from without. Hierarchical societies therefore reduce mankind into a strange sort of animalistic state where human beings are distinct from the objective, but at the same time, forced to adapt to it, ‘d’une façon *supérieurement animale*’,²⁶⁶ rather than change it through autonomous conscious creativity:

Absolument soumis à l’adaptation, l’animal ne possède pas la conscience du temps. L’homme, lui, refuse l’adaptation, il prétend transformer le monde. Chaque fois qu’il échoue dans sa volonté de démiurge, il connaît l’angoisse de s’adapter, l’angoisse de se sentir réduit à la passivité de l’animal.²⁶⁷

It is probable that Vaneigem has Darwin in mind when he associates this reduction to an animal state with survival. The notion that animals must adapt to conditions in order to survive is translated into a society where humanity is forced to survive, like animals, by adapting to social conditions. Adaptation to social norms and constraints therefore reduces man to the animalistic state of a struggle for survival. By a leap of mystification, fetishistic society argues these same social relations, that force human beings into a pseudo-animal state, are justified as necessary to ensure human survival. In other words, the capitalist mind-set is that hierarchy is necessary to ensure survival at all costs, but Vaneigem reveals that hierarchy simply reduces life to survival. The ‘homme de la survie’ is the subject who lives within this state of affairs.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

It is at this point that the language of life and death becomes so central to the critical perspective of Raoul Vaneigem. Given that, as I have explained above, Vaneigem defines *human life* as the conscious creation of the world and the self through praxis, the alienation of praxis—the reduction of Man to a quasi-animal position of survival—actually constitutes the *death* of humanity. Vaneigem means this both literally and analogically in that people can be driven to suicide or to kill due to social relations and that everyday life, by being an alienation of human life, is a sort of *living death*. In other words, what distinguishes human life from animal life—the ability to socially and consciously create happiness, joy, fun experiences, to develop a *joie de vivre*—is reduced to the necessity of adaptation, the activities of an unconscious or semi-conscious animal.

The problem of fetishism is precisely that human beings are not the unconscious animals it reduces them to. Unlike the rest of Nature, Man has a *conscious volonté de vivre*, a complex and rich subjectivity, that is constantly attempting to realise itself through *consciously* transforming the world. The experience of human life reduced to survival is a stifling of this Will and therefore constitutes a consciousness or everyday experience of *suffering*. In other words, the humiliation, isolation, fragmentation and quantification of existence by a social life dominated by the economy is a world that ticks by through a ‘temps mort’ where the subject can never realise itself through transforming the world but is instead transformed by a social existence over which it has no control. Unable to realise themselves freely, Vaneigem argues, they are forced into realising themselves within the hierarchical constraints of a society structured on survival.²⁶⁸ It is in this way that

²⁶⁸ ‘Dans l’optique orientée du consommateur, dans la vision conditionnée, le manque à vivre apparaît comme un manque à consommer du pouvoir et à se consumer pour le pouvoir. A l’absence de la vraie vie est offert le palliatif d’une mort à tempérament. Un monde qui condamne à mourir exsangue est

originally positive drives to live become morbid passions. This explains why capitalist subjects do not merely perform fetishistic acts as a necessity but also at times revel in their inhumanity. As such the ‘*homme de survie*’, or simply ‘*les morts*’, is a subjectivity fashioned in the image of hierarchical social relations. They are subjects whose *volonté de vivre* is sublated into a *volonté de puissance*. The danger of all of this process of dehumanisation is that mankind may very well destroy itself before revolution ever takes place, so rooted is fetishism in the minds of capitalist subjects: ‘Si l’on détruit la passion, elle renaît dans la passion de détruire. Personne, à ces conditions, ne survivra à l’ère de la survie’.²⁶⁹

For Raoul Vaneigem the history of inhumanity and its contemporary reality is one that can be explained by this reduction of man to survival by the economy. But commodity society with its power more clearly rooted in the material, economic condition, Vaneigem argues, reveals the origins of survival in exploitation. Indeed, much of *Traité* is devoted to the discussion of the qualitative differences between earlier societies and capitalist society. For Vaneigem capitalist society is characterised above all by a rationalisation of exchange and the increasing quantification of life that such rationalisation demands. Everyday life, Vaneigem argues, has never been more abstractly mediated by social forms. The number of roles, consumer lifestyles, social norms and constraints has increased. The mythic, qualitative unity or totality, albeit illusory, that once characterised Western society under feudalism was broken with the rise of the bourgeoisie into mere fragments of power, alienated praxis, consumed in the form of commodities.

The importance of the negative project of critique is to show that the increasing abstraction of life, the accumulation of commodities under capitalism,

bien forcé de propager le goût du sang. Où règne le mal de survie, le désir de vivre prend spontanément les armes de la mort : meurtre gratuit, sadisme ...’, *ibid.*, p. 209.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

produces an immense accumulation of suffering in the subject. The experience of alienation, laid bare by capitalism in its openly material and abstract origins, in turn gives birth to the collective desire and critical understanding for the *negation* of fetishistic social relations.

The Positive Project

Just as the desire to destroy social relations provides the negative impetus behind revolution, so the corollary desire for new imagined social relations and ways of life that liberate humanity is the positive. In a sense, where the negative project was the exposition of *praxis aliénée*, the positive project is the exploration of liberated praxis both as revolution and the longer-term results of this liberation. The positive project is therefore the most ‘utopian’ aspect of the work of Raoul Vaneigem, a critique of contemporary society founded on those aspects of lived experience now that stand in opposition to alienation and on its comparison to a way of life in which human creativity is liberated. The positive project should not be considered therefore as completely distinct from the negative project but rather as one aspect of the dialectic of creatively conscious human practice.

The transformation of social life, Vaneigem argues, requires a ‘renversement de perspective’ where the self-understanding, and therefore practice, of subjects is no longer mediated by external forces: ‘c’est cesser de voir avec les yeux de la communauté, de l’idéologie, de la famille, des autres’.²⁷⁰ Vaneigem explicitly associates this with the adoption of the perspective of human praxis: ‘Le renversement de perspective remplace la connaissance par la *praxis*’.²⁷¹ Liberating

²⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 243.

²⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 242-243.

(revolutionary) and liberated praxis therefore demand that the transformation of the world responds to the demands that rise out of lived experience by each subject, individually and collectively. The adoption of this position is the source of all life and the subversive *optique* from which social relations can be transformed: ‘C’est se saisir soi-même solidement, se choisir comme point de départ et comme centre’.²⁷² That is to say, the reversal of perspective is that of ‘la subjectivité radicale’.

Towards the end of *Traité*, and continued in his later work, Vaneigem starts to replace the term praxis with a new language. Just as in the negative project Vaneigem states that ‘Il y a plus de vérité dans vingt-quatre heures de la vie d’un homme que dans toutes les philosophies’, so in the positive project, ‘Les hommes vivent en état de créativité vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre’.²⁷³ In other words, the term ‘creativity’, in the work of Raoul Vaneigem, is simply synonymous with praxis itself. Calling praxis *créativité* is to develop a language away from Marx while still retaining its origins in the Marxian critique of philosophy. Equally, it is meant to bring the positive associations we have with a term usually applied to art to the practice of life.

Vaneigem links liberating and liberated creativity to the quality of *spontanéité*: ‘le mode d’être de la créativité individuelle’.²⁷⁴ Spontaneity is essentially praxis, or creativity, that is autonomous; that is to say, unmediated by hierarchical social relations. As such spontaneity implies lived experience, or consciousness, free of reification and practice, or *réalisation*, that is free of abstract mediation of the subject: ‘la spontanéité constitue une expérience immédiate, une conscience du vécu, de ce vécu cerné de toutes parts, menacé d’interdits et cependant non encore aliéné, non encore réduit à l’inauthenticité’.²⁷⁵ Of course, spontaneity is a term that was used

²⁷² Ibid. p. 243.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 245.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 250.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 251.

commonly in the revolutionary milieu to refer to workers' actions that were organised by workers' themselves.²⁷⁶ With his use of the term Vaneigem is clearly attempting to unite the various aspects of human praxis together as a form of intense creation that replaces art (a mere fragmentation and alienation of human creativity).

Spontaneous (liberated) or revolutionary (liberating) creativity Vaneigem terms *poésie* or poetry.²⁷⁷ In this redefinition of the term Vaneigem sees himself as reaching back towards the term's original meaning.

Qu'est-ce que la poésie ? La poésie est l'organisation de la spontanéité créative, l'exploitation du qualitatif selon ses lois intrinsèques de cohérence. Ce que les Grecs nommaient POIEN, qui est le 'faire' ici rendu à la pureté de son jaillissement originel et, pour tout dire, à la totalité.²⁷⁸

Again in this instance poetry is a term that seeks to replace praxis by giving the idea of praxis the positive associations that we give to poetry. Or rather, to suggest that the Situationist merger of life and art is simply a statement that praxis must be liberated and that this liberation should be termed poetry, because life, and with it the movement to abolish capitalism, will have the qualitative richness previously held only by art. In the later work of Raoul Vaneigem the language of *créativité* and *poésie* completely replaces that of praxis but, at the same time, the critical position of praxis, if not the term itself, is retained within this new language.

In a relatively explicit reference to Nietzsche, Vaneigem describes the realisation of the positive project as a world of 'maîtres sans esclaves'.²⁷⁹ Vaneigem terms this process: 'le dépassement aristocratique de l'aristocratie'.²⁸⁰ As was shown above, Raoul Vaneigem makes extensive use of the Nietzschean concept of the Will

²⁷⁶ An example of this can be seen in Hiver '60, which is discussed in the following chapter.

²⁷⁷ 'Qu'est-ce que la poésie? La poésie est l'organisation de la spontanéité créative, l'exploitation du qualitatif selon ses lois intrinsèques de cohérence. Ce que les Grecs nommaient POIEN, qui est le 'faire' ici rendu à la pureté de son jaillissement originel et, pour tout dire, à la totalité', *Traité*, p. 257.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 272. 'Dépassement', or overcoming, is a term that Vaneigem often uses to refer to libertating praxis in his work. In French it implies a movement of overtaking some object or of moving beyond a fixed boundary.

in his critical thought. But Vaneigem also rejects the *volonté de puissance* in favour of the *volonté de vivre*. Where Nietzsche saw hierarchy as ahistorical and therefore something to be overcome through attaining the aristocratic status, rejecting the social roles and mores that do not suit the subject but also in the sense of realising a desire to dominate others, Vaneigem sees this *dépassement* ‘aristocratique’ only in the rejection of all hierarchical social relations in practice. As such, Nietzsche is wrong to say that mankind is caught between being a master and a slave. Rather, Vaneigem argues, humans are caught between the master-slave dialectic or becoming a master without slaves, by which he means someone who overcomes what seeks to subjugate their individual *volonté de vivre* (i.e. the realisation of new social relations).

The transformation of society, Vaneigem argues, will totally metamorphose the human experience of space and time, as well as our communication and collective transformation of the world and ourselves. The most fanciful imaginings of Fourier, for Raoul Vaneigem, embody the realisation of a ‘nouvelle objectivité’ or ‘nouvelle nature’,²⁸¹ by which he means a society free of fetishism, where humanity will have a completely different consciousness and experience of life than the one we do now. Where in capitalist society the passing of time is experienced as loss due to the alienation of human creativity into the abstract measured time of commodity production and consumption, communist society will embody a time experienced qualitatively, full of rich lived experience born from the pleasure of free poetic creation of everyday life. Spatial relationships will change as the spaces in which we move are shaped by liberated time to serve the needs of individual pleasure and collective creativity.²⁸² The liberation of praxis will abolish work, abstractly mediated

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 279.

²⁸² ‘C’est l’espace-temps unitaire de l’amour, de la poésie, du plaisir, de la communication’, *ibid.*, p. 293.

activity, and it will be replaced by a creative experience that bears the characteristics of play and poetry.

In the light of the positive project, Ducasse's practice of *détournement*, for Raoul Vaneigem, becomes much more than a technique but an expression of liberated praxis in a universal sense: 'Au sens large du terme, le détournement est *une remise en jeu* globale. C'est le geste par lequel l'unité ludique s'empare des êtres et des choses figées dans un ordre de parcelles hiérarchisées'.²⁸³ *Détournement* is the subject engaged in the incessant process of transforming every aspect of the objective according to the desires and imaginative creativity that arise out of lived experience. In this sense, communism, as Vaneigem understands it, is *détournement*: 'La créativité n'a pas de limite, le détournement n'a pas de fin'.²⁸⁴ This is because *détournement* is the general character of liberated creative praxis. It is the constant change and development of the world and the self by human beings through the consciously creative dimension of human practice liberated from its chains.

The critical perspective that Vaneigem outlines in *Traité* demands a complete rethink of the old revolutionary movement. The old social forms, the State, work, the division of labour, the separation of pleasure and labour, exchange, money, the economy, every form of 'communauté aliénante', social norms and roles, all these abstractions that reduce man to the state of an animal, need to be abolished.²⁸⁵ In their place, Vaneigem concludes, there is the possibility of a new world characterised by a 'nouvelle innocence',²⁸⁶ where *détournement*, *réalisation*, *communication*, *participation*, joy and pleasure will characterise the human experience of everyday life and its creation. The abstract mediations that dominate life, turn it into suffering

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 342.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 345.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 354.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 346.

and isolation from one another, will be abolished by the radical subject in ‘la reconstruction des rapports humains par une *praxis* passionnante et consciente touchant tous les aspects de la vie sociale’.²⁸⁷

This chapter sought to clarify the fundamental critical positions developed by Raoul Vaneigem in ‘Banalités de Base’ and *Traité*, his two most influential texts as a member of the Situationist International. It has demonstrated that the perspective of the theory of praxis is absolutely essential to grasping the critical thought of Raoul Vaneigem as a totality. Moreover, the chapter provided new definitions of key terms and ideas based on close reading of these works. The theoretical exposition in this chapter provides a basis for a discussion of the cultural contexts, historical activity and intellectual developments that these texts by Raoul Vaneigem emerged from and to which they have contributed.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 354.

Chapter 2. Belgian Modernity and its Discontents: On the *hennuyer* Origins of the Radical Subject.

With the first theoretical exposition complete, the current work now looks to contextualising the theory of Raoul Vaneigem and his original entrance into the Situationist International. This chapter will examine three new contexts in which to consider Raoul Vaneigem that have gone previously unexamined in the critical literature: first, his working-class background and the events of the Belgian general strike of the winter of 1960-1961; secondly, his relationship with the cultural avant-garde movements of Hainaut; and thirdly, his educational background, in particular his university *mémoire* on the work of Isidore Ducasse. The aim in covering these areas is to provide the critical field with a more complex picture of Raoul Vaneigem before he joined the Situationist International and to show that the history of class struggle in Hainaut was an important source of influence on his work.

Raoul Vaneigem and the *hennuyer* Working Class

Raoul Vaneigem was born on the 21st of March 1934 at number 9 Rue des Carrières in Lessines, Hainaut. Raoul was the only son of working-class parents, Marguerite Tilte and Paul Vaneigem. The name of the street where he was born evidently holds a certain symbolism as it took its name from the local quarries of igneous rock that defined the lives of the 9000 or so inhabitants of Lessines; just as the coal mines did in the neighbouring area of Le Borinage. Raoul's father, Paul, was a *cheminot*, or railway worker, employed by the Société nationale des chemins de fer belges

(SNCB).²⁸⁸ Paul was a committed socialist and trade union member, and shared in the local tradition of anti-clericalism.²⁸⁹ Class struggle was therefore, right from the beginning, a familial context for Raoul Vaneigem in his early development.²⁹⁰

Paul Vaneigem had taken part in the Resistance during the Occupation; he sabotaged carriages that were used for the deportation of detainees.²⁹¹ In his later work Raoul Vaneigem recalls his experience of the Occupation vividly and focuses on a particular air raid as a formative moment in his early critical awareness of capitalist barbarism.²⁹² Vaneigem later had his first direct experience of political violence when he watched the execution of Nazi collaborators after the Liberation in the period of *épuration*.²⁹³

In the 1940s the Vaneigem family moved to Houraing, one of the *faubourgs* of Lessines, which, Vaneigem recalls as the social space in which his class identity as an adolescent was formed. The area was, he tells us, nicknamed ‘la petite Russie’ by the local bourgeoisie for its bolshie population of ‘lumpenproletariat’.²⁹⁴ Raoul attended communist youth organisations such as the Jeune Garde Socialiste (JGS) and the Faucons Rouges, with other children from the area.²⁹⁵ The Maison du Peuple, an

²⁸⁸ Six, p. 16-17.

²⁸⁹ Vaneigem speaks of the ‘éducation irrégulière et anticléricale’ that he received from his parents, see Vaneigem, *Le Chevalier*, p. 208. Religion traditionally played an extremely conservative role in Wallonian class politics, see Els Witte and Jan Craeybeckx, *La Belgique politique de 1830 à nos jours, Les Tensions d’une démocratie bourgeoise* (Brussels: Labor, 1987), pp. 112-117.

²⁹⁰ This extended to other members of his family also. His godmother, Julia Hendricks, frequently told Vaneigem stories of his cousin, her brother, who had fought in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War and was killed at The Battle of Tereul (15 December 1937 – 22 February 1938) aged 18: ‘[Elle] me raconta la révolution espagnole comme une féerie tournant au cauchemar et, sans trop s’en douter, concentra sur le pouacre Franco un potentiel de haine et de furie qui, trop vaste pour un cœur d’enfant, m’exaltait et me rongait tout à la fois’, *Le Chevalier*, pp. 22-23.

²⁹¹ Antoine de Gaudemar, ‘Un situ sans citer’, *Libération*, 12 Nov 1996.

²⁹² *L’Ère des créateurs*, p. 11.

²⁹³ Antoine de Gaudemar, op. cit.

²⁹⁴ Raoul Vaneigem, *Entre le deuil du monde et la joie de vivre: Les situationnistes et la mutation des comportements* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), pp. 109-110.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 110. The JGS was to later play an important role as one of the more radical sections of the workers’ movement during Hiver ’60. The youth groups promoted the idea of the working class as a positive identity and were meant to provide new generations of militants for the leftist institutions that funded them such as the Parti Socialiste. For an extensive critical examination of these youth movements, see Guignard-Perrein, Liliane, ‘Les Faucons Rouges 1932-1950’ (unpublished doctoral

institution much like the English workingmen's club, was another important point of working-class organisation and cultural activity. Vaneigem came here to play the trumpet in the local brass band 'Les Prolétaires'.²⁹⁶ These aspects of a certain *weltanschauung* Marxism, a working class with its own culture and values, are evidently looked back on with a certain, albeit disabused, nostalgia in the more autobiographical sections of Vaneigem's writing. What they show, however, is that Vaneigem was tied to a community that was self-consciously proletarian and, in some sense at least, anti-capitalist in its outlook.

The pervasiveness of a certain radical perspective on capitalist society among the *hennuyer* working class was due to its peculiar social history. Hainaut was the first region on the Continent to undergo the Industrial Revolution;²⁹⁷ this long history of industrialisation defined the population. Throughout the nineteenth century and well in to the twentieth, working conditions and wages in Hainaut were some of the worst in Western Europe. The heavy industries that dominated employment in the region were both physically exhausting and extremely dangerous. Work-related disease and fatal accidents were commonplace. Literally hundreds of men died every year in Hainaut's extraction industries. In 1932, for example, no less than 210 workers were killed in Le Borinage alone.²⁹⁸ While in 1956, 262 workers were killed in a single mining disaster in Charleroi,²⁹⁹ not far from Nivelles where, at that time, Vaneigem worked as a teacher.

thesis, Université Paris X, Nanterre, 1982).

²⁹⁶ *Le Chevalier*, pp. 172-173.

²⁹⁷ Bruno Demoulin and Jean-Louis Kupper, *Histoire de la Wallonie, De la préhistoire au XXI^e siècle* (Toulouse: Privat, 2004), pp. 244-245.

²⁹⁸ This figure is given in a 1933 documentary film by Joris Iven and Henri Storck, *Misère au Borinage*. It is a classic of Belgian cinema that depicts a world of poverty and exploitation that would have been very recognisable to the Vaneigem family.

²⁹⁹ Demoulin and Kupper, p. 316.

The quarries of Lessines were just as dangerous. In a description of his hometown, Vaneigem quotes a fellow Lessinois, the Surrealist poet Louis Scutenaire, on this subject, 'Dans mon enfance on ne trouvait pas la mort chose normale, sauf les suicides et les accidents aux carrières'.³⁰⁰ Vaneigem adds, drawing on his own experience, 'Croisant un enterrement, les gens avaient coutume d'interroger: 'Dé Ké Trô' (Dans quel trou ?)'.³⁰¹ Vaneigem was not an observer of these tragedies; they personally affected him. In one of the most moving passages from his later work, Vaneigem describes his reaction to the death of a close friend, 'Grand Belin', an older boy who fell thirty metres to his death while scaling the rock face to place dynamite:

La mort du Grand Belin m'a fait jurer solennellement de septembriser les patrons et les exploiters et de venger par un massacre à jamais dissuasif les holocaustes quotidiens du capitalisme. Le souvenir de ces jours de rage et de détresse m'est revenu alors que j'écrivais, avec les mots d'une fureur mal contenue, un libelle appelant à l'abolition de la société marchande et à la création d'une société vivante.³⁰²

Here Vaneigem links this deeply personal experience of loss directly to his critique of capitalism and his attempts to overcome it. As much as Hainaut in this industrial period embodied much that is now missed, particularly by a leftism that Vaneigem stands against, the reality was one of a systematic destruction and dehumanisation of life. These kinds of traumatic directly lived experiences were what defined everyday life for the *hennuyer* working class. Vaneigem makes it very clear that he thinks it was this industrial form of alienation that shaped the consciousness of the local population, and gave it a radical edge that both included and went beyond the local context:

³⁰⁰ Cited in Raoul Vaneigem, *Louis Scutenaire* (Paris: Seghers, 1991), p. 16.

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁰² *Entre le deuil*, p. 174.

il y a là [Hainaut] une région que le capitalisme industriel a colonisée sans ménagement, prêtant, par le biais de luttes sociales incessantes, un caractère universel à des conflits locaux et à des aventures existentielles qu'aucune limite territoriale ne saurait borner.³⁰³

Indeed, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the workers of Hainaut quickly developed an international reputation for the extremity and, significantly, spontaneity of their struggle. In the same essay on Surrealism in Hainaut, from which this latter quote is taken, Vaneigem refers to one of the most dramatic examples of this insurrectionary history. On the 18th of March 1886 a demonstration was held by anarchists in Liège to commemorate the anniversary of the Paris Commune of 1871. The reunion soon turned into a riot and looting by the local working population. In solidarity with workers in Liège, workers in Hainaut responded with a wave of wildcat strikes and acts of vandalism. Around 800 workers in Charleroi destroyed local machinery and other property. In Jumet a state-of-the-art glassworks was burned to the ground along with the owner's chateau. The strike, which was now verging on a revolutionary situation, ended only with the intervention of the army, which shot dozens of striking workers.

Vaneigem situates himself in this long line of historical radicalism that belonged to the region through autobiography. The practice of the *grève sauvage* or wildcat strike, a strike undertaken against and often in opposition to party and union leadership, was an important feature of this history; as was the general strike, a strike that mobilised workers across all industries.³⁰⁴ In 1936, for example, workers won massive concessions from the government after an initially spontaneous strike that soon mobilised huge numbers of Belgian workers. In 1950 a general strike combined

³⁰³ Raoul Vaneigem, 'La section des piques du surréalisme' in *Europe*, 912 (2005), pp. 102-111 (p. 103).

³⁰⁴ In his work Vaneigem sees the *grève sauvage* as the key to the realisation of workers' self-management and liberating social change, see *De la grève sauvage*, op. cit.

with a mass march on Brussels by workers brought about the abdication of Leopold III for his collaboration during the Occupation. Vaneigem therefore awoke to the critique of capitalism in the context of a social history defined by working-class life and the constant struggles of his community that would regularly go beyond and against official leftist sanction. He was a teenager when workers marched on Brussels in 1950, but it was Hiver '60, in many ways the most significant of all the wildcat general strikes in Belgian history, that would define his political development and later contribution to the Situationist International.

Hiver '60

The background to the strike was an economic crisis that hit Belgian capital as a result of Congolese independence. At the start of the 1960s, Hainaut was still a highly industrialised region that had largely retained its nineteenth-century character.³⁰⁵ Under the management of financial institutions a few corporations dominated key industries (coal in particular).³⁰⁶ The lack of competition meant that Belgian capital was reluctant to invest in new emerging sectors such as the production of modern consumer goods.³⁰⁷ Instead Belgium had always relied on traditional industry to fund imports. As such, the country was greatly affected by prices on the world market. When international demand for its commodities, such as coal, was high, production soared, when it was low, as in the American recession of 1957-1958, it plummeted.³⁰⁸ Belgian capital had historically foisted the worst of these effects on to its colonies.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ Serge Simon, 'La Grève générale belge (20 décembre 1960 – 20 janvier 1961)' a supplement to *Correspondances Socialistes*, 8 (L'Häy-les-Roses: 1961), p.5.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p.7.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 5-7.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 4-5.

The decision to finally award Congo its independence in June 1960 therefore demanded that the economy be restructured in order to maintain the normal rate of profit capital expected.

A liberal-conservative coalition under the Social Christian Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens (1905-1988) was in power at that moment in time. Towards the end of the year the government announced a programme of structural economic reforms. It was no accident that the announcement came amid the wedding celebrations of King Badouin of Belgium to Princess Fabiola of Spain that was to take place on the 15th of December 1960. A vote was planned in parliament the weekend after the royal wedding. The reforms were to be voted on all in one bill or 'loi unique' (later to be termed 'la loi inique' by workers).

Beneath the rhetoric of structural reform and progress was a brutal austerity programme. It proposed a number of new taxes, 85% of which hit workers hardest, a 3 billion franc reduction in the public sector, the extension of the retirement age from 60 to 65, and a 25% increase in pension contributions.³¹⁰ The 'loi unique' also threatened the welfare system. It proposed to exclude certain workers from unemployment and health care after a number of weeks.³¹¹ These measures were to be accompanied by a 'système d'inquisition' aimed at people on benefits.³¹²

The response of the official left to these moves was either underwhelming or simply in tune with the government. *La Gauche*, the weekly organ of the left-wing minority of the Parti Socialiste Belge (PSB), claimed that these changes were a technical and not a political problem. The Fédération générale des travailleurs belges (FGTB), the central authority that organised the majority of trade unions, agreed to limited industrial action after immense pressure from its base. They demanded,

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

³¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.

³¹² Ibid.

however, that any strike-action be kept to the ‘Communaux et Provinciaux’, or public sector, workers.

On the 20th of December 1960 workers began to go on strike throughout Belgium, in both Flanders and Wallonia. Workers from across all sectors, not just the public sector, went on strike, in open opposition to the orders of the FGTB and the policy of the workers’ parties. Among the first to strike spontaneously, that is to say, workers organising themselves outside mediating union and party structures, were dockworkers in Anvers, metalworkers in Charleroi and teachers. In factories in almost every part of the country, but particularly Hainaut and Liège, workers organised their own strike committees and general assemblies. In effect, workers had created an alternative, directly democratic, form of organising that was outside union or party control. Union reps that condemned these moves were met with open hostility and condemned as ‘jaunes’ or scabs. In at least one recorded instance a union delegate was beaten so badly that he had to be hospitalised.³¹³

The strike slowly brought the whole of Wallonia to a standstill as it spread. The general response of the leftist leadership was to invoke ‘la dignité’, ‘la discipline’, ‘la calme’ and to blame certain ‘irresponsables’.³¹⁴ Such language did little, however, to combat the general enthusiasm workers felt in the real empowerment that they had created in self-organising or the sense that the leadership was simply obstructing any effective action. One correspondent recorded that he had heard workers respond to these *mots d’ordre* with the pithy phrase, ‘la dignité, je l’emmerde’.³¹⁵ The face off with the unions reached such a height that, on the 22nd of December, around 200 hundred workers amassed outside FGTB headquarters in

³¹³ A first hand account is recorded on p. 13 of *Socialisme ou Barbarie, ‘Les Grèves belges’* (Paris: 1961). Hereafter referred to as *SoB*.

³¹⁴ Simon, ‘La grève générale belge’, p. 13, 18.

³¹⁵ *SoB*, p. 26.

Liège.³¹⁶ They were furious at the refusal of the officials to support the strike. Rocks were thrown at the building and some workers even attempted to force their way in.³¹⁷

Very quickly the original cause behind the strike, the famous ‘loi unique’, faded into the background as the movement took on a revolutionary character. In the daily demonstrations throughout the country the most common cry was ‘les usines aux ouvriers!’³¹⁸ Workers already controlled much of the infrastructure and the many strike committees embodied an alternative power structure, a genuine dictatorship of the proletariat, outside state, party or union control. In effect, the real organising of workers had produced an historical moment that went beyond a simple response to a government austerity programme. The sense of empowerment is palpable in the statements of those taking part:

‘La Loi Unique, c'est important, mais les causes sont beaucoup plus profondes’. ‘On en a marre, tu comprends’. ‘Ils se foutent de nous!’ ‘Même si on n'obtenait rien, on leur a quand même montré qu'on les emmerde’, ‘ils ont la frousse’. Un vieux cheminot: ‘J'ai jamais connu une ambiance comme ça, on n'a jamais été aussi heureux’. Ils sont tous très fiers que le mouvement soit de la base.³¹⁹

While confrontations with the leadership were not entirely new, the scale and extent to which workers had simply organised the struggle on their own was on a level that had rarely, if ever, been seen before in Belgium. Among other novel aspects of the strike was the importance of youth. School children, students and young workers were some of the most aggressive and revolutionary participants. With them were the *blousons noirs*, a new sub-cultural group of young rebels influenced by rock ‘n’ roll and films like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), who rode motorcycles and wore black

³¹⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

leather jackets.³²⁰ The JGS, the same communist youth group Vaneigem had attended as a child, was one of the most combative leftist tendencies. Disdain for the leadership was at its height among these young people. After one union boss had claimed ‘les travailleurs wallons ne voulaient pas être les fellaghas d’Alger-sur-Meuse’ (the Meuse is the main river that goes through Hainaut), protesting students were heard to shout ‘Nous voulons être les fellaghas d’Alger-sur-Meuse’.³²¹

Events reached a peak on the 27th of December when some 700, 000 workers were on strike. Normal everyday life in Wallonia and many parts of Flanders had completely stopped. Factories were occupied, roads blocked and workers sabotaged infrastructure. Even Christian workers, usually the least combative had joined in opposition to their union. A statement was published in *La Wallonie* that called on the army to fraternise with workers, to not fire on them and to refuse to break strikes. The government arrested the authors and stopped the press but it was soon pasted up in copies on town walls. The threat of mutiny was such that in Charleroi, always at the centre of events, the police had to be used in order to stop workers and soldiers from fraternising.³²² One interviewer who spoke to a soldier was told straight out that he would refuse to shoot if ordered.³²³ The government’s greatest fear was that workers would march en masse for Brussels, as had happened in 1950, or that they would arm themselves. The army was sent in to protect arms manufactories and cultural buildings.

Had workers continued to control the organisation of the movement of Hiver ’60 there is really no way to say how far it may have gone. However, this is not what happened. The union leadership began to look for ways to take control of what had

³²⁰ The *SoB* edition actually contained an interview with a *blouson noir* who was part of the movement.

³²¹ *SoB*, p. 13.

³²² Simon, ‘La grève générale belge’, p. 31.

³²³ *SoB*, p. 225.

become a reality despite their original opposition. Among the first was André Renard who, after the fact, declared the FGTB in Liège in support of the general strike on the 21st of December. The central body of the FGTB had formally declared itself in favour of strike action by the 27th of December but still only in Anvers and Wallonia. It was the start of a process of seizing control of the organisation of the movement. In Flémalle, Liège, union reps refused to recognise the strike committee there and hunted down its members so that they could be ejected from the union.³²⁴ Gradually the unions replaced the spontaneous forms of organisation with its own bureaucracy. Now in control they were better able to shape the discourse such as limiting the insurrectionary character of the movement to a simple critique of Prime Minister Eyskens and 'la loi unique'. Moreover, there was now no organising body through which workers could directly and collectively realise their intent.

A speech delivered by André Renard was by far the most disastrous of all the attempts to stop the movement. Earlier Renard had saved face because he had been one of the first union leaders to support the strike. For some he had therefore emerged as one of the few leaders worth listening to. Renard argued that the real impetus behind the movement had been the historic ethnic divide between Flanders and Wallonia. The strike had been a call for Wallonian independence from the yoke of Flanders. The speech should be considered in the historical context where Flanders had never been as industrially developed as Wallonia. As such, the Flemish working class were, traditionally speaking, less well-organised and influential. In Parliament this translated into a dynamic where the right-wing politics of Flanders was used to suppress the left-wing politics of Wallonia. Renard's speech was to be the death knell of Hiver '60 and would in many ways define Belgian politics of the future that is

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

based on ethnic division rather than the tradition of solidarity among the class across ethnic boundaries.³²⁵

It was most ironic that Renard had made this speech given that the workers of Anvers in Flanders had been among the most radical and some of the first to go on strike. The speech was a serious blow to the solidarity that had existed between Walloon and Flemish workers and that had been key to the generalness of the strike. Too many Walloon workers it seemed listened to Renard and workers in Flanders felt betrayed. The strike waned through January 1961 as workers began to take up work again. In Wallonia certain sectors held out until near the end of the month but by the 18th of January Hiver '60 had come to an end. The only result, declared a victory by the unions and parties, was that some of the leftist leaders were allowed to meet with the king to discuss their opposition. The revolutionary moment had passed and even the merely reformist aspirations of the movement had failed to be realised.

Hiver '60, however, had not simply been a disappointment. In many ways it embodied a great success. Almost the entire workforce of Wallonia had self-organised a spontaneous insurrectionary movement that, for a while at least, had stood in open opposition to its own representation (the leftist leadership and its representative structures). In this, Hiver '60 looked back to the Hungarian Uprising, four years earlier,³²⁶ and forward to what would be May '68. Vaneigem, and other Situationists, may well have been an important conduit for how the link between the two was made.

Above it was shown that Vaneigem was very much situated in the working-class communities that were the ones to enact the movement of Hiver '60. When the strike took place Vaneigem was working at a *lycée* in Nivelles, a steel-working town

³²⁵ The *SoB* edition pointedly described this discourse of Renard as racist at the time, *SoB*, p. 27.

³²⁶ One member of the SI, Attila Kotányi, was a Hungarian exile who lived in Belgium and would later collaborate closely with Vaneigem within the group.

not far from Lessines, and as a teacher was part of one of the important sectors to take action from the beginning. In Paris, Hiver '60 was seen as an important moment of working-class action against the official Left. Guy Debord at the time was associated with the *Socialisme ou barbarie* journal, the organ of Pouvoir ouvrier (PO) of which he was then a member, that planned to do a special edition on it. He asked Pierre Guillaume of *SoB* to speak to Vaneigem, as a comrade on the ground, on a fact-finding mission to Belgium. There had up to this point been no direct contact between Debord and Vaneigem. Eventually, Vaneigem contacted Debord directly for the first time in a letter dated the 24th of January. Debord replied amicably on the 31st. He regretted that they had been unable to meet in Paris due to events, 'mais tout de même, la grève était mieux'.³²⁷

Neither Vaneigem nor the SI published a direct statement about Hiver '60 at the time.³²⁸ However, Vaneigem has made it very clear that Hiver '60 was a central element to the origins of his collaboration with Debord and his membership of the SI, 'Les grèves, qui inaugurèrent, en Belgique, les années 1960, nous autorisaient à porter à la révolution de la vie quotidienne un toast dont les mots se sont perdus mais dont les échos n'ont pas fini de résonner'.³²⁹ Hiver '60 was evidence of a new momentum in the international workers' movement. Vaneigem suggests here that it provided impetus to the development of Situationist critique in the 1960s; the period that prepared for May '68. There are many ways in which this may well be the case.

³²⁷ Guy Debord, letter to Raoul Vaneigem, 31 January 1961.

³²⁸ Though one member of the SI, André Frankin, was excluded over disagreements with Situationists in Belgium about 'l'action politique à mener après la grande grève belge', *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962), p. 50. There is also a letter from Debord to Frankin previous to this in which he expresses his regret at the failure of the strike and of the possibilities for Situationist involvement in its aftermath, see Guy Debord, letter to André Frankin, 24 January 1961. We can also see from this letter that the active members of the SI in Belgium at this time were Maurice Wykaert (though he was not apparently present for the strike), André Frankin, Attila Kotányi (who, as an immigrant, was in danger of deportation, so could not make public statements), and, ironically, Debord and Jorn who were neither Belgian nor lived there but were some of the better known members of the SI in the region.

³²⁹ *Le Chevalier*, p. 177.

Vaneigem joined the SI in the immediate aftermath of Hiver '60. His entry into the SI came at a point of massive change in the organisation. Previously, there had been some debate within the SI from the 'right' or 'artist' wing of the group over its 'political' nature; they disagreed with the possibility of proletarian revolution due to the apparent satisfaction of workers and an incapacity to act against their own bureaucracy.³³⁰ As will be discussed in the following chapter, Vaneigem was crucial in the rejection of this artistic tendency at the Gothenburg conference in the summer of 1961.³³¹ The Situationist International focused on the development of a coherent critique of contemporary capitalism and the revolutionary milieu from this point onward. Vaneigem was key to this process as the author of major theoretical texts such as 'Banalités de Base' and *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*.³³² Is it possible that Hiver '60 was therefore a kind of galvanising moment for the SI?

Certainly a number of the themes of Hiver '60 appear to be directly taken up in *Traité* (written between 1962 and 1965). The phenomenon of the *blousons noirs*, for example, as an emergent rebellious social group is a point of interest for Vaneigem:

S'il existe aujourd'hui un phénomène international assez semblable au mouvement Dada, il faut le reconnaître dans les plus belles manifestations de blousons noirs. Même mépris de l'art et des valeurs bourgeoises, même refus des idéologies, même volonté de vivre. Même ignorance de l'histoire, même révolte rudimentaire, même absence de tactique.³³³

³³⁰ See *Internationale situationniste*, 5 (December 1960), pp. 20-21.

³³¹ See *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962), pp. 26-27.

³³² The fact that Vaneigem is named 'Le Vampire du Borinage', of all things, by the SI after his role in the exclusion of the 'artists' underlines the fact that he was seen by his comrades as an important link the radical social movements of Hainaut, see *Internationale situationniste*, 8 (January 1963), p. 10.

³³³ *Traité*, p. 234.

Vaneigem recognises the potential of this group that had been so active in events in Belgium. However, the *blousons noirs* is also an object of critique. The sentiments of the *blouson noir* are well founded. They reject the official left along with bourgeois society. But it is a milieu that still lacks a critical coherence behind its practice. It is essentially a nihilist rejection of capitalist society that lacks ‘la conscience du dépassement possible’.³³⁴ It is still a consciousness trapped within capitalist social categories.

It is important that this consideration comes in what is arguably the central chapter of *Traité*, ‘Le refus en porte à faux’. It is here that Vaneigem examines the various ideologies that have perverted revolutionary history. Perhaps most significant is the way in which a representation of the proletariat comes to stand against it in its moments of revolutionary ascendancy:

Dès que le peuple en armes renonce à sa propre volonté pour suivre celle de ses conseillers, il perd l’emploi de sa liberté et couronne, sous le titre ambigu de dirigeants révolutionnaires, ses oppresseurs de demain.³³⁵

Such is exactly what had happened at the height of Hiver ’60. In this Hiver ’60 is no different than so many other social movements that have given over their management to a representative structure. But Hiver ’60 was also the most recent and the only movement of this type that Vaneigem had yet taken a direct part in. The argument here is the same as that made by Guy Debord in what is also arguably the central chapter of *La Société du Spectacle*, ‘Le Proletariat comme sujet et comme représentation’. The working class is at a point where its own representation has become an autonomous force that stands against it. So many workers had found this theory a concrete reality in Belgium in the winter of 1960-1961, as Vaneigem and

³³⁴ Ibid., pp. 234-235.

³³⁵ Ibid., p. 216.

Debord well knew. What is interesting is that it is only after Hiver '60 that these questions come to the centre of their writing.

A lot of assumptions about the history of the SI are challenged if it is the case that Hiver '60 marked the point at which it would become the group that would prepare the way for May '68. The expulsion of the artists is more clearly the result of their failure to respond to the real movement of workers. Raoul Vaneigem can be seen as a bearer of the momentum Hiver '60 and the radical history of his home region brought to the group. The two major theoretical works that the SI published in 1967, *Traité* and *La Société du Spectacle*, should be seen as much in the context of this earlier social movement to which they responded as to the one they would ultimately come to influence. In many ways May '68 surpassed Hiver '60 in its rejection of this autonomous representation of the revolutionary movement that stands against it. It was the SI in those years between that had most undertaken the critique necessary to make this a reality. The struggle of workers in May '68 would therefore connect directly to Hiver '60 through the critical work of Raoul Vaneigem and the other Situationists.

The Belgian Avant-garde: Surrealism and Proletarian Literature in Hainaut

Our discussion of the relationship between Raoul Vaneigem and Belgian modernity has up to this point focused exclusively on his direct experience of class struggle and working-class life in Hainaut. There is, however, another crucial aspect to his *hennuyer* background: the radical cultural tradition of the region. Hainaut has a surprisingly rich avant-garde heritage for an old and largely unrecognised industrial

backwater of Northern Europe. It was in Hainaut, for example, that Van Gogh decided to renounce a church career in order to pursue the life of an artist. He was inspired to do so, in part, due to the deep connection that he, like many artists and poets before and after him, developed with local workers, describing their ‘festering and deep rooted hatred and [...] innate distrust of anyone who tries to boss them around’.³³⁶ Rimbaud and Verlaine also travelled here, both writing evocative poems, ‘Au Cabaret-Vert’ and ‘Charleroi’ respectively, on this industrial Black Country.³³⁷ Hainaut is far more interesting, however, for its indigenous tradition of counter-cultural movements that Vaneigem, at least, suggests extends back as far as the Movement of the Free Spirit in the Middle Ages,³³⁸ and forward all the way to the Surrealists such as René Magritte and Louis Scutenaire, both, like Vaneigem, natives of Lessines.

Throughout his life and work Raoul Vaneigem has consistently and explicitly drawn upon and even promoted the radical cultural history of Hainaut. One of the first articles that Vaneigem ever published was on the work of the *hennuyer* Surrealist Pol Bury,³³⁹ and, even as early as ‘Banalités de base’, he can be observed citing Marcel

³³⁶ Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Theo Van Gogh, April 1789, *Vangoghletters.org*. Web 15 June 2012. Van Gogh actually visited some of the mines of Le Borinage and lived with a *borin* miner for a period; his famous ‘Potato eaters’ series was partly inspired by Hainaut. Vaneigem also lists Van Gogh as one of his three favourite painters, see *Conversation*, p. 43.

³³⁷ Verlaine was actually imprisoned in Charleroi for two years after shooting and wounding Rimbaud. His poem evokes the ever-dominating industrial landscape of Hainaut: ‘Plutôt des bouges / Que des maisons. / Quels horizons / De forges rouges! / [...] Sites brutaux! / Oh! votre haleine, / Sueur humaine / Cris des métaux!’, Paul Verlaine, ‘Charleroi’ [1872], *Poésies complètes* (Paris: Éditions de La Banderole, 1923), pp. 177-178.

³³⁸ ‘C’est dans les villes du Rhin—Cologne, Mayence, Strasbourg—et les cités du Nord—Valenciennes, Amiens, Cambrai, Tournai, Bruxelles, Anvers—que le Libre-Esprit se manifeste avec le plus de détermination et, comme disent les historiens, sous ses formes les plus grossières’, *Libre-Esprit*, p. 138. Tournai is a town in Hainaut, just East of Lille, very close to Lessines and Ath where Vaneigem is from. Brussels is also very nearby.

³³⁹ Raoul Vaneigem, ‘Pol Bury ou l’Humour rétractile’, *Synthèses, Revue Internationale*, 179 (1961), pp. 298- 299.

Havrenne, another Surrealist of Hainaut.³⁴⁰ In 1984 he produced a never-realised film script, a biopic in fact, based on the life of Charles-Joseph de Ligne, a native of Hainaut, who stands, alongside Casanova, as one of the greatest memoirists of the eighteenth century.³⁴¹ In 1991 Vaneigem published a book on the life and work of Louis Scutenaire (in large part a reprint of the latter's *Mes Inscriptions*).³⁴² Finally, in 1999, Vaneigem released *Sur les pas des écrivains en Hainaut*, under the pseudonym Robert Desassarts, a comprehensive introduction to the literature of the region that demonstrates an encyclopaedic knowledge of its authors and history.³⁴³ Taken together these references and publications denote a close association between Vaneigem and this cultural aspect of Belgian or, even more specifically, *hennuyer* modernity that deserves closer analysis.

In order to understand the specificity of the relationship between the Belgian avant-garde and Vaneigem it is first necessary to give an idea of the Situationist relationship with culture in general and with Parisian Surrealism in particular. It is important to stress that the term 'culture' for the Situationists does not refer to the universal production of signs and symbols. Rather, 'culture', for the SI, denotes a specific set of historical relationships under which these are produced. In capitalist society the symbolic sphere exists as a realm of human activity that is separate from everyday

³⁴⁰ 'Pour qui assortit de violence l'humour de Marcel Havrenne écrivant si joliment 'il ne s'agit pas de gouverner et encore moins de l'être', il n'y a ni salut ni damnation', 'Banalités de base', *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962) p. 41.

³⁴¹ This is one of the more surprising new documents I discovered in my bibliographical research in the archives of the Royal Library in Brussels. Although it has little bearing on his contribution to the SI or his critical theory, the script is quite interesting in its own right. No doubt highly influenced by Stanley Kubrik's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), it follows the comic, sexual and philosophical escapades of de Ligne and his manservant against the backdrop of eighteenth-century European society. See Raoul Vaneigem, 'Charles-Joseph de Ligne' (unpublished film script, 1984), Archives et Musée de la littérature, Bibliothèque Royale Albert I, Brussels, Côté: MEM TOO972M. Elsewhere, Vaneigem describes de Ligne as a 'Diderot futile' who, though lacking the same spirit of revolt, shares a certain charm, see Raoul Vaneigem [Robert Desassarts], *Sur les pas des écrivains en Hainaut* (Brussels: L'Octogone, 1999), p. 69.

³⁴² *Louis Scutenaire*, op. cit.

³⁴³ *Sur les pas*, op. cit.

life.³⁴⁴ Historically, this has meant that art had some degree of autonomy from direct implication in commodity production, although it embodied what we could call the ‘dark side’ of its reproduction,³⁴⁵ and it made rich, qualitative experience the preserve of a purely symbolic form of social practice, a mere representation. The Situationists therefore saw culture as a mode of social praxis specific to capitalist society that, at worst, provided ideological justification of that society, and at best, expressed the possibility of rich unified experience but one that in the form of art could exist only as an ideal. The Situationists therefore sought to abolish culture as a separate sphere of human activity, what Debord terms the ‘dépassement de l’art’,³⁴⁶ in order to realise it in the qualitatively rich and passionate creation of our everyday lives. Moreover, this could necessarily not be achieved by abolishing culture alone but it implied the abolition of all social separations, from the economy to the state. It should be added that, at the time the Situationists were writing, culture was becoming more directly implicated in economic reproduction, particularly in the form of advertising for the new consumer-based economy. This process they described as the ‘décomposition’ of art or ‘la crise de la culture’.³⁴⁷

This critique of culture and art is what defined the Situationist relationship with the avant-garde in general and with the Parisian avant-garde in particular. The SI obviously emerged out of the avant-garde tradition of contesting the culture of bourgeois society but what separated it from what came before, in their eyes, was an

³⁴⁴ For a detailed version of the Situationist critique of culture, see Debord, *Œuvres*, pp. 843-855; see also, Raoul Vaneigem [Jules-François Dupuis], *Histoire désinvolte du surréalisme* [1977] (Paris: Éditions de l’Instant, 1988), pp. 7-46. What is presented here is an interpretation based on a synthesis of these two primary sources.

³⁴⁵ I am referring here to Anselm Jappe’s theory of the ‘dark side’ of value that refers to those areas of capitalist reproduction—such as childcare within the family—that are not necessarily directly mediated by value but are nonetheless indirectly essential to its continued existence. See the chapter ‘Le côté obscur’ de la valeur et le don’ in Anselm Jappe, *Crédit à mort*, pp. 129-154.

³⁴⁶ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 847. This was also the title of painting by Debord with these words, see *ibid.*, p. 654.

³⁴⁷ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 845; Vaneigem, *Histoire désinvolte*, p. 7.

awareness that culture itself needed to be overcome and that this implied a total transformation of every aspect of human society. The Situationists therefore situated themselves in a Hegelian teleology of cultural history: The Dadaist movement had sought to destroy culture absolutely but had failed to realise its message of a free creative life beyond social separations. Surrealism had sought, in turn, to realise the symbolic possibilities of culture but without first seeking to abolish it along with the totalising critique of capitalist society that entails.³⁴⁸ As such, Dada had simply dissolved into pure nihilistic destruction; while, by the late 1950s, Surrealism had only served to reinvigorate it (and advertising) despite its original revolutionary professions. The Situationists claimed to overcome both Surrealism and Dada by seeking to realise and abolish art and culture through the creation of a coherent totalising critical praxis aimed at the abolition of all capitalist social categories and the creation of a passionate, consciously creative, existence beyond them.³⁴⁹

While the core of this position had already been established before he joined the group, as can be seen from the first issue of *Internationale situationniste*,³⁵⁰ Raoul Vaneigem would very quickly make it his own and enrich it in a number of significant ways. As several authors have explored, most notably Jérôme Duwa in his, *Surréalistes et situationnistes, vies parallèles* (2008), there are a number of important points of connection between the SI and the Parisian Surrealists.³⁵¹ Certainly, both Debord and Vaneigem, along with the rest of the SI, were avid readers of its major

³⁴⁸ 'Le dadaïsme a voulu *supprimer l'art sans le réaliser*; et le surréalisme a voulu *réaliser l'art sans le supprimer*', Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 848.

³⁴⁹ 'La position critique élaborée [...] par les situationnistes a montré que la suppression et la réalisation de l'art sont les aspects inséparables d'un même dépassement de l'art', Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 848.

³⁵⁰ In particular the very first article by the SI 'Amère victoire du surréalisme' and the subsequent 'Définitions', see *Internationale situationniste*, 1 (June 1958), pp. 3-4, 13-14.

³⁵¹ Jérôme Duwa, *Surréalistes et situationnistes, vies parallèles* (Paris: Dilecta, 2008).

and minor figures, from André Breton and Philippe Soupault to Paul Éluard and Georges Bataille. In the main we can say that the Situationists took from the Parisian Surrealists the idea of an avant-garde group that practiced inclusion and exclusion in order to retain a certain theoretical coherence, the practice of scandal as a means of political provocation, and the critique of the boredom of everyday life that rested upon the rediscovery, or even recreation, of the world as a place full of possibilities for subjective adventure and intense experience.

The most prominent contribution of Raoul Vaneigem to this subject, outside *Traité* and, presumably, debates within the SI, was his *Histoire désinvolte du surréalisme* first published under a pseudonym in 1977 but originally written towards the end of his time in the Situationist International.³⁵² Vaneigem focuses his account of the history of Surrealism in particular on its Parisian expression. Vaneigem gives due credit to the Parisian Surrealists for a number of aspects of their work. He claims, for example, that one can find in parts of the work of Breton a veritable denunciation of ‘survival’ (as defined in the previous chapter).³⁵³ Further, Vaneigem also brings attention to the concern of the Surrealists with feeling and the primacy that this gives to areas of subjectivity usually excluded in critical discussion.³⁵⁴ Indeed, the Surrealists, for Vaneigem, were reincorporating into our notion of subjectivity elements that are often excluded in capitalist ideas of human creativity and agency such as love, the unconscious and dreams.³⁵⁵ Above all, however, Vaneigem sees the Surrealists as a kind of didactic literary movement that popularised revolutionary authors such as Fourier and, of most significance to himself, Isidore Ducasse, le

³⁵² Significantly, Vaneigem originally published the book under the pseudonym Jules-François Dupuis, the name of Isidore Ducasse’s landlord, the last person to see the author of *Les Chants de Maldoror* alive.

³⁵³ *Histoire désinvolte*, p. 47.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 66-68, 74-78, 78-80.

Comte de Lautréamont.³⁵⁶ The influence of Parisian Surrealism, and the movement more generally on Vaneigem, as for the rest of the SI, is therefore patently obvious.

However, what is perhaps more important and, indeed, more interesting about this relationship is the absolute vehemence of the critique that Vaneigem levels at Surrealism, and particularly its Parisian manifestation, in this work. The central point of this critique is Vaneigem's claim that Surrealism was essentially a literary and artistic movement despite its revolutionary voluntarism and rhetoric. Vaneigem argues that the Surrealists proved themselves incapable of developing a coherent theoretical and practical critique of capitalist society.³⁵⁷ He suggests that this was in large part due to the essentially artistic concerns of the Surrealists grouped around Breton. The Surrealists, he argues, therefore had revolutionary intentions on a subjective level but objectively they were prone to compromise with culture.³⁵⁸ Although Breton celebrated subjectivity and called for the transformation of everyday life he was unable therefore to attach them to a critical social praxis and as such he simply turned authentic desires for freedom into an aesthetic.³⁵⁹ The Surrealists therefore condemned themselves to merely harrying official culture as a counter-cultural movement and presented nothing more than a revolution of the mind.³⁶⁰ As such, it was almost inevitable that the Surrealists should leave the main thrust of the revolution to the Communist Party, to which they would eventually adhere, because they never became the revolutionary theorists they should have been.³⁶¹ The Surrealists, for the most part, thereby turned a project of human emancipation into

³⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 65-66.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 66.

³⁶¹ 'ces jeunes gens qui eussent dû s'affirmer comme théoriciens et praticiens de la révolution de la vie quotidienne, se contenteront d'en être les artistes, menant une guerre d'escarmouches à la société bourgeoise comme s'il appartenait au parti communiste de lancer l'offensive', *ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

support for the most authoritarian of pseudo-revolutionary institutions. Vaneigem argues that the Surrealists therefore served only to renovate the Spectacle³⁶². They embodied what he calls a ‘reformist’ movement,³⁶³ an ‘ideology’ of liberation,³⁶⁴ which on the one hand, proposed a merely cultural critique of culture and, on the other, hid the real potential of the proletariat’s own spontaneous revolutionary activity to abolish Spectacular society.³⁶⁵

With the critical relationship between Parisian Surrealism and Raoul Vaneigem established, we can now turn to his specific ties to Surrealism in Hainaut. The idea of an important link between the Situationists and the Surrealists of Belgium has already been suggested by several critics. Andrew Hussey, for example, argues that Louis Scutenaire acted as a ‘bridge’ between the pre- and post-war avant-gardes, in particular the Situationists, due to the fact that his poetic techniques are rooted in ‘the real politics of class struggle and violent revolution’.³⁶⁶ Yves Di Manno, in turn, suggests that Paul Nougé was a precursor of Guy Debord because both authors sought to abolish the separation between art and life.³⁶⁷ Indeed, Debord seems to have had more direct contact with the Belgian Surrealists than those in Paris. He corresponded with Marcel Mariën and published a number of important Situationist texts in the Belgian Surrealist journal *Les Lèvres nues*.³⁶⁸ Neither Hussey nor Di Manno,

³⁶² Ibid., p. 15.

³⁶³ Ibid., p. 18, 50.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 15, pp. 70-71.

³⁶⁶ Andrew Hussey, ‘The Splendours of Hatred: Louis Scutenaire between Surrealism and Situationism’ in *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism. Belgian Modernity in the Making*, ed. Nathalie Aubert and others (London: Legenda, 2007), pp. 190-198 (p. 191, 194).

³⁶⁷ Yves Di Manno, ‘La révolution la nuit’, *Europe*, 912 (2005), pp. 74-79.

³⁶⁸ See, for example, Guy Debord, ‘Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine’, 6 *Les Lèvres nues* (September 1955); ‘Mode d’emploi du détournement’, 8 *Les Lèvres nues* (May 1956); ‘Théorie de la dérive’, *Les Lèvres nues*, 9 (November 1956). In 1953 the Situationists also sent a response to a questionnaire published in an issue of *La Carte d’après nature*, edited by René Magritte, see Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 119.

however, have much to say about the relationship between Vaneigem and the Belgian Surrealists.³⁶⁹ Yet, as was noted above, this influence was clearly far more extensive for Vaneigem than for any other Situationist. Moreover, although for him no branch of Surrealism escapes the negative critique given above, in a later article, ‘La section des piques du surréalisme’, first published in 2002, Vaneigem contrasts the Surrealist project in Hainaut against Parisian Surrealism as a more radical expression of the Surrealist movement.³⁷⁰

In this article Vaneigem suggests that, where the Parisian Surrealists were, despite their protestations to the contrary, far more interested in literature than in revolution, the *hennuyer* Surrealists were, at least to begin with, more genuinely concerned with the struggles of the working class against commodity society.³⁷¹ The reason for this, Vaneigem argues, is not due to any voluntarism on their part, but rather, due to the pervasive proletarian culture and the radical history, which we have discussed above.³⁷² What is more, where the Surrealist movement in Paris was dominated by the authoritarian grip of André Breton, in Hainaut Surrealism enjoyed far more liberty of association and action.³⁷³ Vaneigem therefore suggests that we could think of the Surrealist group in Hainaut as Surrealism’s ‘section des piques’, after one of the most radical sections of the city of Paris during the Revolution, and of which the Marquis De Sade was an important member.³⁷⁴ If what he says is the case it is highly significant because it would suggest that this branch of Surrealism emerged out of exactly the same milieu, albeit of an earlier generation, as Vaneigem himself.

³⁶⁹ Hussey does make passing reference to the publication of Vaneigem’s *Louis Scutenaire* but without exploring the relationship much further.

³⁷⁰ ‘La section des piques’, op. cit.

³⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 102-103.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 103.

There is, in fact, a lot of evidence to support the idea that the Surrealists of Hainaut were radicalised specifically by their links with the struggles and lives of the *hennuyer* working class. To begin with many of the Surrealists of Hainaut and associated figures came from working-class families. Paul (Pol) Bury, for example, was the son of a car mechanic.³⁷⁵ Marcel Pofondry's father was a miner and René Lefebvre's father was a worker.³⁷⁶ Alphonse Boulard (1903-1969), better known by his pseudonym Constant Malva, a proletarian literature author and a member of the original Surrealist group in Hainaut, called Rupture, was himself a coal miner who worked in the mines of Le Borinage for most of his life. Although some of the more well-known figures such as Louis Scutenaire were from more middle-class backgrounds, they were still close to the local working-class community, which was pervasive in this region. Somewhat symbolically, where Guy Debord had attended the same school as Lautréamont in Pau, Vaneigem attended the same local school in Lessines (and later university) as had Louis Scutenaire many years before.

More than these sociological factors, however, in the original Surrealist group in Hainaut, named Rupture after its journal founded in 1934, there was clearly a conscious desire to connect up with the struggles of the *hennuyer* proletariat. Achille Chavée, poet and co-founder of the group, is actually very explicit that it was this merger of Surrealist ideas from Paris with the revolutionary activity of the local working class that provided the original impetus for the first Surrealist group in Hainaut:

Le groupe Rupture était fondé en Mars '34. Mais le point de départ, c'était évidemment la découverte [...] du Surréalisme, de Paris, naturellement. Et aussi, le phénomène des grandes grèves à caractère révolutionnaire de 1932. Nous avons été très sensibilisés par ces événements et nous avons fait

³⁷⁵ Paul Aron, *La littérature prolétarienne en Belgique francophone depuis 1900* [1995] (Brussels: Labor, 2006), p. 174.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

naturellement la synthèse entre la situation et l'aspect culturel du problème. [...] Rupture, nous voulions indiquer par ce terme non-conformisme total [...] radical [...] à l'égard [de] la culture bourgeoise.³⁷⁷

It is quite clear from these words that Chavée is still reproducing to some extent the social separation between culture and politics that Vaneigem is so quick to critique in his *Histoire désinvolte du surréalisme*. However, there is also a certain unity to them in the consciousness that it is the revolutionary activity of the working class itself that is providing the original inspiration behind their interest in Surrealism. The issue of culture, for Chavée as for the Situationists later, cannot be disassociated from the real struggles of radical movements against capitalism. Moreover, as in Hiver '60, the strikes that shook Le Borinage in 1932 were also characterised to some extent by clashes of interest between workers and their representatives. At the time, this was framed somewhat in terms of a battle between revolutionaries and reformists. It is striking that, just as Vaneigem would later join the SI in 1961 in the aftermath of Hiver '60, it seems these other *hennuyer* figures joined up with another Paris-based avant-garde movement much earlier under similar circumstances.

As we saw above, the central criticism Vaneigem aims at Surrealism is that it was not able to create its own coherent theoretical and practical critique of capitalist society. It is reasonable therefore to assume that, in claiming the Surrealist movement in Hainaut embodied a more radical project than that undertaken in Paris, Vaneigem believes the connection of the Belgian Surrealists to local working-class movements was concretely reflected in their critical praxis. In 'La section des piques', it is clear that Vaneigem believes one of the high points of the Surrealist group in Hainaut was its

³⁷⁷ Magritte, *groupe Surréaliste de Bruxelles et Rupture (1920-1939) I* (Sub Rosa, 2007), CD.

production of critical, and often humorous, aphoristic statements.³⁷⁸ Vaneigem reproduces a number of these aphorisms in his text. Taken together they could be thought of as a guide by Vaneigem to the group's most lucid theoretical positions from his perspective.

First, Vaneigem is particularly keen to highlight that the Surrealists of Hainaut rejected regionalism and expressed strong anti-nationalist convictions. He goes so far as to say that there is no such thing as 'Belgian Surrealism' because the Surrealists of Belgium always rejected any national identity.³⁷⁹ This statement should also be understood in the sense that in this article Vaneigem is explicitly not trying to make claims to Surrealism as part of a regionalist identity.³⁸⁰ On the contrary, he is saying that it had and continues to have international implications. As evidence of this anti-regionalism on the part of the Surrealists of Hainaut, Vaneigem cites, to begin with, Louis Scutenaire, who made the tongue-in-cheek call for all peoples to stay where they belong, 'les Maoris au Groenland, les Basques en Éthiopie, [...] les Picards à Samos';³⁸¹ and later on in the text, this moribund and humoristic pun by Achille Chavée: 'la patrie repose dans la tombe'.³⁸² Of course, these aphorisms do not amount to a 'theory' in the sense of a highly developed set of abstract proposals and assertions, but they are still theory in that they embody critical ideas that imply a rejection of a certain kind of social practice: specifically the rejection of movements of emancipation within nationalistic frameworks.³⁸³

³⁷⁸ 'cette formule qui a la clarté d'un éclair, répercutant de loin en loin son tonnerre', 'La section des piques', p. 105.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Cited in Vaneigem, 'La Section des Piques', p. 102. The *hennuyer* working class spoke a Picard dialect so it is quite clear Scutenaire is referring to his home region too.

³⁸² Ibid., p. 106.

³⁸³ Vaneigem also cites Havrenne's 'Il ne s'agit pas de gouverner et encore moins de l'être', *ibid.* p.107, which also suggests that these anti-nationalistic statements may have been accompanied by a critique of the state and hierarchy more generally.

Secondly, the Surrealists of Hainaut, Vaneigem shows us, critiqued the sphere of circulation and exchange. He cites, for example, a boldly blunt *détournement* by Marcel Havrenne of the Emperor Vespasian: ‘L’argent n’a pas d’odeur mais il fait puer tout le reste’.³⁸⁴ This rather folkish statement is accompanied by another, more world-weary and knowing, aphorism by Chavée: ‘On fait des terribles économies sur le néant’.³⁸⁵ And along with this, Vaneigem includes Chavée’s even more irreverent statement: ‘J’ai pissé sur cent mètres de banque’.³⁸⁶ Again, these proclamations do not amount to a fully developed theoretical discussion as one finds in a work of theory, but this is what we could term radical poetry, and as we saw in the previous chapter, for Vaneigem, radical poetry merges to some extent with revolutionary theory. The rejection of exchange by the Surrealists of Hainaut is therefore an important aspect of the revolutionary ideas that they were putting forward in their work; that it takes the form of a simple aphorism does not diminish this fact.

Thirdly, the citations that Vaneigem makes demonstrate that the *hennuyer* Surrealists also critiqued the sphere of production. The key figure in this respect is Louis Scutenaire who it is clear Vaneigem considers to be the leading light of much of what was most lucid about the avant-garde project in Belgium. For example, Scutenaire provides much jocular insight into unemployment that would have been a highly visible problem for his community: ‘Le chômage est déplaisant parce qu’il n’est pas tout à fait généralisé’.³⁸⁷ If the absolute rejection of work is not clear enough in this latter statement, Vaneigem provides us with another example by Scutenaire that is even more to the point: ‘Je hais le travail au point de ne pouvoir l’exiger des

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 107.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 106.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 110.

autres’.³⁸⁸ The critique of the sphere of production actually puts Scutenaire into direct conflict with the theories of Orthodox Marxism, which traditionally has always seen production as a merely technical issue and identified capitalism solely with the sphere of exchange. It therefore mirrors the critique of work that the Situationists would later launch on the world with the demand: ‘Ne travaillez jamais’.³⁸⁹

It seems obvious therefore that Vaneigem sees in the Surrealists of Hainaut a foreshadowing of certain aspects of future Situationist praxis. Of course, the Situationists would take this to another level, developing a rich body of critical theory that the Surrealists were never able to attain themselves, but this does not detract from an obvious degree of influence. Indeed, although we have limited our discussion here to those elements highlighted by Vaneigem, further examination of the works of *hennuyer* Surrealists are brimming with proto-Situationist notions. For example, despite the fact that he would later become a well-known artist, Pol Bury, in his *Les Caves Botanique* of 1938, gives voice to an anti-art sentiment that is clearly rooted in this connection of the Surrealists of Hainaut with the local working class and even evokes the possibility of a ‘poésie vécue’.³⁹⁰ The work of Scutenaire, in particular *Mes Inscriptions* that Vaneigem took such pains to reprint, is, moreover, full of statements to the effect that we have discussed above. There is a language here that clearly finds a later outlet in the work of Vaneigem, himself a writer gifted with the aphoristic turn of phrase, and even in the graffiti that found its way onto the walls of Paris during May ’68

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 89.

³⁹⁰ ‘Achille Chavée me fit découvrir plus que l’art: une poésie vécue où l’œuvre, la vie se regardaient l’une et l’autre. A partir de cette rencontre l’‘artiste-peintre’ m’est apparu comme une dérision de l’art, comme un marquis poudré au milieu d’une réunion syndicale de mineurs de fond’, Pol Bury, cited in *Le Mouvement Surréaliste à Bruxelles et en Wallonie (1924-1947), du 20 mai au 18 septembre 1988* (Centre Culturel Wallonie Bruxelles, 1988), no page.

Albeit not strictly speaking surrealist, the proletarian literature of Hainaut is another local counter-cultural movement that Vaneigem refers to in 'La section des piques'. He focuses in particular on the work of Constant Malva, referred to above, who was a member of the Rupture group and a life-long friend of many of the key *hennuyer* Surrealists. Founded in the 1930s by the French author Henri Poulaille, proletarian literature broke with traditional literary movements by rejecting aesthetic innovation as its foundation in order to instead seek the quality of 'authenticity'. This authenticity was established by the fact that the author of the proletarian literature text had to be an actual member of the working class, or at least from that background, who wrote about, or from the perspective of, his own lived experiences of work and proletarian life.³⁹¹ As was noted in the previous chapter, Raoul Vaneigem also places a lot of store in the notion of authenticity being rooted in lived experience so it seems likely, given his interest in Constant Malva, that proletarian literature may provide a source of inspiration for this conceptualisation of revolutionary praxis in his work.

Born in Hainaut in 1903, Malva followed his father into the mines of Le Borinage at the age of 15.³⁹² Although he gained some minor literary success in later life, he came directly from this mining milieu and he worked as a miner for most of his existence. In 'La section des piques', Vaneigem displays an easy familiarity with the writing of Malva, citing from several of his works, and he describes him as the author of some of the most authentic texts in the proletarian literature movement.³⁹³ Indeed, Malva is an extremely sensitive and honest author who takes great pains to document through anecdote, conversation and, occasionally, novelisation, his life and the lives of his community, his family and his friends. The frankness with which he treats the lives of those associated with Hainaut's extraction industries is often highly

³⁹¹ See Aron, pp. 7-8.

³⁹² For a selection of his works, see Constant Malva, *La Nuit dans les yeux* (Brussels: Labor, 1990).

³⁹³ 'La section des piques', p. 108.

subversive. He records the suffering, the alcoholism, domestic abuse and the sheer levels of destructive physical exploitation endured by the mining community at the root of it all. Far from picturesque, the mine in his work is a place that every single miner wishes himself and his sons to escape but which somehow proves impossible to leave. In his own assessment of Malva, Vaneigem highlights how the author faithfully records the workers' rejection of work, a sentiment that the Situationist claims is 'enraciné dans le prolétariat' but which has always been actively obscured by leftist ideologues.³⁹⁴ Vaneigem is also clearly impressed with the way in which Malva honestly records his own subjective frustrations as a member of the *hennuyer* working class, both as a militant frustrated with the leftist milieu and more generally as a human being struggling with the emotional isolation of capitalist social relations to the point that he contemplates suicide.³⁹⁵

Whether or not the proletarian literature of Malva provided the theoretical impulse behind the notions of authenticity that Vaneigem develops in his own writing, it is a fascinating body of work that tells us much about the working-class milieu in which the avant-garde counter-cultural movements of Belgian modernity developed. Indeed, due to the fact that the economy of Hainaut did not shake off its nineteenth-century character until well into the 1960s, Malva could be read alongside Zola's *Germinal* (1885), a novel set just over the border from Hainaut with a similar Picard language and culture, in a world that was not unfamiliar to *hennuyer* workers growing up in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ *Germinal* was in fact a major source of inspiration for Malva. Vaneigem also refers in passing to the effect the book had on him as a child, see *Le Chevalier*, p. 21.

I have now examined some of the specific ways in which Raoul Vaneigem may have been influenced by the counter-cultural movements of Hainaut and his opinion of them. The weight of evidence suggests that the *hennuyer* avant-garde is an important context in which to consider Vaneigem and some of the sources of his contribution to the SI. Is it possible then to situate the life and work of Raoul Vaneigem within a cultural historical trend that has been termed ‘Belgian modernity’ and into which these same Surrealists have already been grouped?

In *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism, Belgian Modernity in the Making* (2007), Nathalie Aubert and others define the characteristics of Belgian modernity as ‘distance’, ‘doubleness’ and ‘negation’.³⁹⁷ First, they note that Belgian avant-gardes have typically harnessed themselves to metropolitan centres such as Paris in order to move beyond their own national boundaries.³⁹⁸ But equally, Belgian culture also retains a certain regional quality and is keen to stress its peculiarities.³⁹⁹ The Surrealists, Aubert and others claim, played ‘a game of distance and proximity’ with their associates in France.⁴⁰⁰ Moreover, they state that prominent sources of inspiration, including Berlin and Paris, cannot be considered ‘foreign’ sources of influence.⁴⁰¹ This is because Belgium contains ‘the Nordic, the Latinate, the French and Germanic, the Walloon and the Flemish’ within it.⁴⁰² The Belgian writer, Aubert and others conclude, ‘does not have to look to Paris in order to look outside himself’.⁴⁰³ Secondly, they assert that Belgian culture is at home with ambiguity and duality.⁴⁰⁴ It is characterised by ‘hybrid sensibilities’ and paradox.⁴⁰⁵ Belgian avant-

³⁹⁷ Aubert and others, op. cit.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 1

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 1, 3.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

gardes constantly escape easy classifications and consciously bring them into question.⁴⁰⁶ Thirdly and finally, they argue that many Belgian modernists often prefer ‘the double negative as the only credible positive’, or ‘anti-definition’, and celebrate ‘plurality and internal dissent’.⁴⁰⁷ In this respect, Aubert and others argue, the practice of subversion and *détournement* as well as a certain ‘anti-ambition’, an avoidance of literary fame, is typical of the Belgian avant-garde.⁴⁰⁸

In terms of ‘distance’ Vaneigem is clearly part of this traditional game of distance and proximity. He associates himself with members of the Parisian section of the SI and the class struggle in Paris. At the same time, he is self-consciously *hennuyer*. As a member of the SI he was nicknamed ‘La Vampire du Borinage’ and his work is full of an evident interest in the radical counter-cultural history of his home. Moreover, in his more autobiographical writing, Vaneigem roots much of his early intellectual development in his working-class background and the history of class struggle he inherited from his community. He therefore stresses, like many writers from Belgium, both his distinctness and autonomy from Paris. Yet he is also keen to embrace what is useful to him and be part of an international project. His is a typically hard to classify anti-regionalist, regional interest. The work of Raoul Vaneigem is evidently characterised by a certain ‘doubleness’. He employs the double negative as a tool to break through the over-simplifications of capitalist society in order to access a more complex theoretical and practical reality. Vaneigem asks us, for example, to be ‘maîtres sans esclaves’;⁴⁰⁹ he speaks of the false distinction between ‘réel et imaginaire’,⁴¹⁰ and continually describes life in the contemporary world as a kind of living death or death in life. The work of Vaneigem is also clearly

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁰⁹ See page 98 of the current work.

⁴¹⁰ *Traité*, p. 122.

characterised by ‘negation’. The abolition of capitalist social relations and the corollary realisation of human freedom in communist society is the essence of his project. For Vaneigem, negation, as an aspect of revolutionary praxis, exists as the desire to transform the world, to replace *la volonté de puissance* with *la volonté de vivre*, work with creativity, inhumanity with humanity.

Given the number of parallels between the life and work of Raoul Vaneigem and the characteristics of Belgian modernity that Aubert and others define, it seems relatively unproblematic to situate Vaneigem within this historical tendency. However, this should certainly not mean that Vaneigem be considered a ‘Belgian’ author or that his work should be considered within the Belgian context alone. On the contrary, it suggests that Vaneigem and, most crucially, the Situationist International as a whole found within Belgian modernity certain qualities that spoke to the *international* revolutionary movement against capitalist society. It was, as Vaneigem himself suggests, more an accident of historical circumstances that the Surrealist avant-garde in Hainaut was, due to its proximity to working-class life, partially conscious of the importance of tying class struggle to the struggle against culture. Moreover, it is important to stress, as Vaneigem does, that the Surrealists of Hainaut did not ultimately escape the errors of their Parisian counterparts. Indeed, Vaneigem notes that Achille Chavée returned from serving in the International Brigades in Spain as a convinced member of the Communist Party: ‘Tandis que Breton se ralliat au bourreau de Constradt, Chavée, Scutenaire et leurs amis—à l’exception d’André Lorent [...]—célèbrent les vertus de Staline’.⁴¹¹ Vaneigem does not therefore romanticise the radical cultural movements of Hainaut. He recognises their

⁴¹¹ ‘La section des piques’, p. 111.

limitations. Indeed, it was precisely the failure of the Surrealist movement in Belgium and Paris that made the Situationist International necessary.

Education and University *mémoire*

Before we move on to considering Raoul Vaneigem as a member of the Situationist International, it is worth examining the role that education played in his intellectual development. In the extant literature on the SI, the early Situationist writing of Vaneigem seems to appear as if from nothing. There is an implication that as a thinker Vaneigem owes nearly everything to his contacts with Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord. As will be demonstrated, however, there is plenty of evidence that Vaneigem already had a relatively developed critical theory that engaged with both the cultural avant-garde and Marxism long before he joined the Situationists. Clarifying this aspect of the intellectual development of Raoul Vaneigem will provide a more complex and accurate understanding of where his theory emerged from and what he would later bring to the SI.

The formal education of Vaneigem began at the *école moyenne* in Lessines in 1942.⁴¹² From 1948, however, he attended the more prestigious *Athénée* in the neighbouring town of Ath where he focused on greco-latin studies.⁴¹³ Although Vaneigem has almost nothing to say about his own formal education in his writing, in 1995 he did published a critique of capitalist education, *Avertissement aux écoliers et lycéens*, which knew quite a deal of success.⁴¹⁴ Vaneigem does note, however, that the

⁴¹² Six, p. 18.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Raoul Vaneigem, *Avertissement aux écoliers et lycéens* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 1995). Of course, Vaneigem was himself later a teacher at the *lycée* in Nivelles, a post which he held until 1964 after an affair with one of his students. For details of the scandal, see Guy Debord, letter to Mustapha Khayati, 16 February 1966.

work that would most influence his intellectual development during his adolescence was a translation of *Le Combat avec le démon* by Stefan Zweig.⁴¹⁵ This text embodies a collection of three biographies of the lives of Kleist, Hölderlin and Nietzsche respectively. Zweig suggests these authors can be grouped together because the creativity of each emerged from a struggle with a desire, their *démon*, that was constrained or denied by bourgeois society: Kleist by his homosexuality, Hölderlin by his longing for the utopia of his childhood and Nietzsche by his, albeit more abstract, desire to realise his will. It is quite clear that the *démon*, particularly with this latter association, is an early source for Vaneigem of the notion of *volonté de vivre* that he develops in his work. Indeed, as was noted in the previous chapter, there is a particular passage in *Traité* on this subject that seems to be either a *détournement* from this text by Zweig or, at the very least, inspired by it.⁴¹⁶ This certainly suggests that the origins of some of the essential elements of the critical theory of Vaneigem go very far back into his past.

In 1951 Vaneigem was accepted at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) to study philosophy and romance philology.⁴¹⁷ The ULB was, at that time, a traditional left-wing stronghold that counted Louis Scutenaire and other Surrealists among its alumni. Again, Vaneigem is not very forthcoming about his university education in his writing. It seems likely he may have encountered certain artistic avant-garde figures and militants within the wider far-left scene.⁴¹⁸ It has also been suggested that Vaneigem was briefly attracted to Trotskyism at around this time.⁴¹⁹ However, the facts are by no means clear. What we do know is that Vaneigem formed a friendship

⁴¹⁵ Zweig, op. cit.

⁴¹⁶ See page 93 of the current work.

⁴¹⁷ Six, p. 18.

⁴¹⁸ His only anecdote from this period concerns his frequent visits to a bookshop on the Rue Dusquesnoy in Brussels run by a man who had bitter memories of the International Brigades in Spain, see *Entre le deuil*, p. 158.

⁴¹⁹ De Gaudemar, op. cit.

with one of his university teachers, Emilie Noulet (1892-1978), an expert on Symbolism who was also a former lover of Valéry and, when he knew her, the wife of a Spanish political exile. Vaneigem corresponded with Noulet from around the mid-1950s, when he began his university *mémoire*, until the early 1960s, during the start of his time in the SI.

This still-unpublished correspondence of Vaneigem to Noulet concerns for the most part his attempts to create a new form of poetry and contains original poems in this vein.⁴²⁰ Given that this correspondence is the closest we can come to the positions laid out by Vaneigem in the ‘Fragments pour une poétique’ that he would later send to Lefebvre and through which Debord would first know him, it is very suggestive of exactly why Debord thought Vaneigem could possibly make a valuable member of the SI. Vaneigem speaks, for example, of creating a ‘poésie graphique’ that combines musicality, visual elements and a didactic revolutionary message in order to agitate the proletariat to action.⁴²¹ The poems themselves are not as interesting as the actual intention behind them, as Vaneigem seems to be aware, presenting them rather as a sketch.⁴²² He is very clear in these letters that poetry can never be an end in itself. For him, the poet must play the role of agitator. He is extremely dismissive, for example, of modern poetry, which he claims is overly individualist and serves only to legitimise capitalist society.⁴²³ Somewhat surprisingly, given his later interest in the movement, Lettrism receives particular scorn.

It should be understood, however, that Vaneigem says this in the context of seeking to overcome the limitations of poetry in order, as he sees it, to create the new

⁴²⁰ Raoul Vaneigem, unpublished letters to Emilie Noulet, 1957-c.1962, Archives et musée de la littérature, Bibliothèque royale, Brussels, côté: ML 08574/0004-0005.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

means of communication required to bring about revolutionary action.⁴²⁴ There is already a sense here therefore that culture is a problematic form of transmission. Indeed, in these letters Vaneigem seems to be saying that poetry is, or should be, that which serves to make popular consciousness more lucid and, in so doing, moves it towards its historical destiny of creating a world which is, as he puts it, ‘sans faim et où l’amour se confond avec le réel’.⁴²⁵ There is a foreshadowing here of his position in *Traité* that radical poetry and theory are one and the same. In these letters this idea is clearly tied for Vaneigem to contemporary working-class struggles that he notes are at that very moment rejecting both Stalinism and reformism.⁴²⁶ Vaneigem clearly wants to play his part: ‘Le ton, c’est la voix gigantesque d’octobre 1917, la clé, la pensée marxiste’.⁴²⁷ In this respect therefore Vaneigem already shared positions that were moving in the direction of those then being developed by Guy Debord and the other members of the SI.

By far the most revealing text by Vaneigem in this period, however, is his university *mémoire* on the life and work of Isidore Ducasse that was written in around 1955 to 1956. There are in fact two versions of this work: the original manuscript and a second, toned-down, version, which was submitted after the first was rejected by examiners due to its overt radical politics and explicit sexual content.⁴²⁸ Expunged from the final version is an introduction, entitled ‘Préliminaires’, in which Vaneigem sets forth his approach to literary criticism. The predominance of Marxian

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Raoul Vaneigem, ‘Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont’ (first version of unpublished *mémoire*, Université libre de Bruxelles, 1956), Archives et Musée de la littérature, Bibliothèque Albert I, Brussels, Côté: MLA 17142; ‘De la part de Lautréamont aux Enragés’ (second version of unpublished *mémoire*, Université libre de Bruxelles, c.1956), Bibliothèque Principale des Sciences Humaines, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, côté: MEM T00972M.

materialism in this approach is quite apparent. Vaneigem consistently suggests that the subject of critique, in this case the work of Ducasse, should always be considered as an aspect of, and in relation to, a concrete historical totality. The role of the critic, Vaneigem argues, is not to examine any single aspect in isolation but rather to attempt to represent the whole.⁴²⁹ Implicit to Vaneigem's methodology is the idea that this social totality, of which the work of art is one part, is filled with contradictions in dialectical, and therefore transformative, relationship with one another. The work of art, he suggests, as a part of this totality, also embodies the whole.⁴³⁰ Whether this is in some sense true of all art is not entirely clear, though there is the sense in the *mémoire* that a large part of the genius of Lautréamont, for Vaneigem, is that his work *consciously*, at least latterly (for reasons that will become clear below), plumbs the depths of these contradictions so well.

One of the reasons that this earlier section was expunged is perhaps that it contains a number of vitriolic rhetorical remarks against the state of contemporary criticism. Vaneigem claims in the strongest terms that literary critics are guilty of 'dirtying' or 'dishonouring' (*salir*) Isidore Ducasse.⁴³¹ The literary critic is even presented as something of a pitiable and contemptible figure by him.⁴³² These rhetorical flourishes are notable both as early examples of the polemical style that would come to its peak in *Traité* and in demonstrating that, even in this examination

⁴²⁹ 'Le critique devrait être à la fois esthéticien, économiste, historien, sociologue, philosophe, psychologue. À vouloir se tenir à une spécialité, il a réussi à n'être rien qu'un entremetteur inutile entre le public et l'œuvre d'art', 'De la part de Lautréamont', p. 5.

⁴³⁰ 'L'œuvre de Lautréamont obéit au mouvement d'une vie biologique, psychologique, sociale et consciente (les virgules ne tenant pas lieu de séparation de fait), elle représente à son degré le plus élevé les transmutations d'un esprit, l'évolution d'une société et l'incessant bouleversement du monde', *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴³¹ 'Nous n'avons pas à défendre Lautréamont mais à empêcher qu'on le salisse', *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴³² 'Toujours, dans le sillage du critique une odeur d'hyène lève le cœur, un corbeau passe comme une croix et demeure unique une trace pareille à la béquille d'une punaise éclopée. Comment en serait-il autrement? Sa pitance lui monte des cimetières; sa passion, des exécutions sommaires [...] et son enquête, de frémissements microscopiques sur quelques cellules du génie', *ibid.* p. 4.

context, Vaneigem was already expressing his characteristic disdain for the cultural and academic world.⁴³³

Although this section is eliminated in the second version, Vaneigem takes the opportunity of a new one to add an appendix where he expands on his ideas about a materialist reading of literature in general.⁴³⁴ Vaneigem argues that ideology and culture depend on the relations of production currently in effect.⁴³⁵ Vaneigem seems relatively explicit that this is not a *technical* question, ‘infrastructure économique’, which would be the orthodox Marxist version of things, but a *social* question.⁴³⁶ It is the social relationships between people that define the economy, culture and ideology, all of which (as the graph he provides in the appendix tries to convey) are in a dialectical relationship with one another. The genius of a writer like Lautréamont or Diderot, Vaneigem argues, is to have lived these social relationships, at a point when they are changing, and then to have consciously represented them within the symbolic sphere of their work.⁴³⁷ Thus the writer reveals the essence of the new social relationships in development, hastening our conscious awareness of them.

Vaneigem also suggests that this same process, in the greatest writers, reveals to them ‘la dialectique du réel’. Throughout the *mémoire* Vaneigem makes reference to fundamental dialectical laws of reality and even positively cites Lenin as a

⁴³³ Indeed, it is likely, given both the subject matter and the critique of abstract stylistic approaches to it, that Vaneigem particularly has in mind Roger Caillois, author of the Introduction to the 1946 edition of Ducasse’s complete works. ‘Chère Callois’ is singled out in a letter from Vaneigem to Noulet as being one of those critics who legitimise ‘le vrai monde des robots, de la médiocrité, des bourrages de cranes, des bureaucrates imbéciles des poètes autographes’, see Raoul Vaneigem, unpublished letters to Emilie Noulet, op. cit. Clearly, Vaneigem’s penchant for pithy insults preceded his entry into the SI.

⁴³⁴ This takes the form of a Diderotesque discourse between two imaginary interlocutors simply titled A and B. The former is essentially the voice of an interested party or examiner and the latter Vaneigem himself.

⁴³⁵ ‘Isidore Ducasse’, p. 172.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ ‘Diderot saisit, sans en mesurer toujours l’importance, la réalité immanente qui surgira peu à peu dans la conscience des hommes. Il l’exprime contre l’idéologie du temps, annonce les formes nouvelles en découvrant la dialectique du réel, et hâte leur apparition dans la pensée du XVIIIème siècle’, ibid. p. 173.

discoverer of them.⁴³⁸ It is clear that Vaneigem is basically referring here to the orthodox Marxist idea of dialectical materialism where dialectics is erected as a kind of metaphysical fundamental property of the physical universe. This is by far the weakest part of the *mémoire* and clashes with the more concrete considerations previously described. However, extracted from its roots in Marxist dogma, what Vaneigem seems to have been moving towards in these comments is a very non-orthodox Marxian notion of revolutionary praxis, such as that outlined in the previous chapter: that there is a potentially liberating, creatively conscious dimension of practice that is essential to humanity. There is by no means any such clear or coherent statement to this effect, however, at this point; but it might explain why Lautréamont, whose technique of, what would later be called, *détournement* was so essential to the SI's early notions of liberating activity, was such an important figure for Vaneigem to explore before developing a more coherent theory of alienating and liberating praxis.

The actual substance of the *mémoire* is true to its intention of crystallising as concrete a historical and biographical picture of Ducasse and his work as possible. Vaneigem travelled to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris in order to undertake extensive original archival research for this project. Vaneigem is clear that his guiding principle is to try to grasp Isidore Ducasse as a real, rich and complex human being of his times: 'Pierre de touche: l'image de Ducasse recomposée par le critique est-elle compatible avec l'œuvre, non seulement, mais avec l'Homme en général et, en particulier, avec l'homme du Second Empire?'.⁴³⁹ Starting from this point of

⁴³⁸ 'Il n'entre pas médiocrement dans le génie d'Isidore Ducasse d'avoir, avec un sens analytique inouï, découvert la nature contradictoire du réel. Fait-il rien d'autre, lorsqu'il accroche violemment deux mots, deux images, deux pensées et de leur union tire une forme nouvelle, que d'actualiser à des fins esthétiques la loi dialectique de la pensée, découverte par Lénine', *ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴³⁹ 'De la part de Lautréamont', p. 3.

departure, the *mémoire* moves through a series of demonstrations of how *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies* are rooted in the lived experiences of Isidore Ducasse.

For example, Vaneigem is insistent from the beginning of the *mémoire* that the representations of violence found in the work of Ducasse are a reflection of the actual times in which the author lived: 'La violence Lautréamontienne atteint sa mesure selon l'intensité d'étouffement du Second Empire'.⁴⁴⁰ As such, Vaneigem says, his work in this respect cannot be considered as 'bizarre', 'exceptionnel' or as some kind of 'monstreuse excroissance'.⁴⁴¹ The fact that this violence surprises us at all, Vaneigem states, is only the result of an 'erreur d'optique' that 's'estompe sous nos yeux la monstrueuse tyrannie de l'époque où vivait Ducasse'.⁴⁴² This decision to tie the themes of *Les Chants* and *Poésies* to the historical realities of Second Empire society and, as we shall see, the author's experiences of these realities is maintained throughout the *mémoire*.

Early on Vaneigem draws the reader's attention to the relationship between Ducasse and his father, François Ducasse. Vaneigem notes that the image of father figures in the work of Ducasse is always negative.⁴⁴³ They are presented as authoritarian and hypocritical. This applies equally to God who, Vaneigem suggests, is subconsciously tied in Ducasse's mind to his own father. Based on the little details that are known about his family life and this vitriolic treatment of the *pater familias* in *Les Chants*, Vaneigem suggests Ducasse had a particularly difficult relationship with his father that contributed to a disdain for the family and anger towards hierarchical social forms in general.⁴⁴⁴ The lived experience of Ducasse in this sense also speaks to the wider social structures of the time. Vaneigem notes, for example, that the

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ 'Isidore Ducasse', p. 9, 16-20.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

family was a highly topical issue in contemporary literature.⁴⁴⁵ *Les Chants*, Vaneigem suggests, is therefore very much rooted both in its times and in the biography of Ducasse. Thus, one of the key features of analysis that is found in *Traité*—the idea that lived experience and emotion provide a crucial source for an understanding of social structures and the desire to overcome them—is already evident in the *mémoire*.

Although Isidore Ducasse was born in Montevideo, he was sent to school as a young child in southern France, first in Tarbes and then Pau.⁴⁴⁶ Vaneigem tries to imaginatively trace the journey and experiences of Ducasse in these early years. His research focuses primarily on some accounts by school friends and oblique references to this time in *Les Chants*. It would appear that, for Vaneigem, this period further instilled in Ducasse a desire to escape the banal existence to which his society had condemned him.⁴⁴⁷ However, Vaneigem is clearly also concerned to emphasise that Ducasse was, in many respects, an outwardly unremarkable youth. Indeed, Vaneigem argues that Ducasse, as he appeared to others, was the complete opposite of his creation Maldoror. *Les Chants de Maldoror*, Vaneigem argues, is the outgrowth of someone who has been forced to repress his desires, to never act on them, because these desires have been denied by the society in which he lives. The fury and passion demonstrated in *Les Chants* is a, at first unconscious, psychic projection of these frustrations onto the symbolic plane.⁴⁴⁸

Vaneigem does not, however, feel that the sheer level of destructive negativity expressed by Ducasse in his work at this point can be explained simply by a poor

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴⁴⁶ The school in Pau was the same one that Guy Debord would briefly attend in the following century.

⁴⁴⁷ Certainly, Vaneigem sees the escape from banality as a driving force behind both Isidore and his father, 'Isidore Ducasse', p. 25.

⁴⁴⁸ 'Une fois admis que 'Maldoror' résulte d'une résorption permanente de rêves, d'idéaux, de besoins contrariés par la vie d'Isidore Ducasse en société, on réalise mieux avec quelle violence les pulsions refluaient au contact de l'extérieur et combien l'adolescent devait fatalement paraître faible', *ibid.*, p. 42.

paternal relationship and a dull school life. Rather, Vaneigem seeks the answer to this specifically in Ducasse's struggle with his homosexuality in the face of a society that rejected it.⁴⁴⁹ Vaneigem focuses in particular on the figure of Georges Dazet with whom it is now generally thought Ducasse had a sexual relationship before moving to Paris after he finished his education. Much of Vaneigem's evidence for this is based on the subtly erotic language employed by Ducasse in *Les Chants*, which, in an earlier version of the start of the book is specifically aimed at Dazet.⁴⁵⁰ At the time Vaneigem was writing in the 1950s, however, this was by no means made explicit and it seems that his was the first work to really make use of this hypothesis in its analysis. Vaneigem essentially suggests that, despite his earlier relationship with Dazet, or even because of a rupture of some kind, when Ducasse began *Les Chants* he had chosen to repress his homosexuality.⁴⁵¹ Maldoror is, for Vaneigem, therefore a projection of repressed desires launched against society.

With these points established Vaneigem asserts that, because they were written in chronological order, the different songs of *Les Chants de Maldoror* and then *Poésie*, can be read as an almost cinematographic set of successive representations of the state of Ducasse's inner world.⁴⁵² Having launched his repressed desires against the world in the form of Maldoror, Vaneigem argues, Ducasse becomes increasingly conscious that this is in fact what he is doing.⁴⁵³ As a result, the *mémoire* closely reads *Les Chants*, in particular the theme of revolt—but also love, art and humour—in order to reveal this process.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., pp.44-48.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p. 106.

⁴⁵² Ibid., pp. 88-89.

⁴⁵³ 'Face à Maldoror, Isidore Ducasse parvient à graduer ses passions, celles dont se sont emparées les 'Chants'. Maldoror, c'est sa façon de les posséder, de leur attribuer une vie autonome, de les observer en cours de développement comme une microscope s'attache à suivre une cellule jusqu'à sa texture la plus imperceptible', *ibid.*, p. 58.

The first ‘prise de conscience’, Vaneigem argues, occurs through the writing of the first song after which Ducasse begins gradually to direct the hatred of Maldoror in more rational and specific directions as he becomes aware of the revolt he has launched against the world.⁴⁵⁴ Vaneigem argues that the second ‘prise de conscience’ occurs towards the closure of the book when Ducasse comes to understand that it is society he is critiquing and ultimately has to overcome the pure malice of Maldoror for a new kind of revolt.⁴⁵⁵ Moreover, Vaneigem suggests, it is also at this point that Ducasse, having become conscious of the ignoble roots of oppressive social norms, consciously embraces his homosexuality, merging it with his attack on the Second Empire society.⁴⁵⁶ *Poésie*, Vaneigem argues, is the result of this conscious rejection of pure insurrection, embodied in Maldoror, in favour of a more utopian ideal of social transformation founded on the collective realisation of individual desires.⁴⁵⁷ He sums up his position quite succinctly: ‘Ducasse [...] donne [Maldoror] son congé tandis qu’il unit révolte et praxis sous le couvercle des *Poésies*’.⁴⁵⁸ That Vaneigem employs the term praxis in this context is particularly significant as it shows a possible movement away from the more orthodox Marxist notions described above based on a critical engagement with the work of Ducasse.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 58-60.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 92-93, 100-105, 153.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 92.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 101.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 93.

⁴⁵⁹ It is in *Poésies* that the two key axioms of *détournement*, constantly evoked by the SI, are expressed: ‘La poésie doit être faite par tous. Non par un’; ‘Le plagiat est nécessaire. Le progrès l’implique. Il serre de près la phrase d’un auteur, se sert de ses expressions, efface une idée fausse, la remplace par l’idée juste,’ Isidore Ducasse, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), p. 288, 283. It seems more than an accident of history that Isidore Ducasse should have been such an important figure in the early intellectual development of the two men who would become the key theoreticians of the SI: Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem.

The political assertion of the *mémoire*, and the implicit conclusion, is that the work of Isidore Ducasse is essentially the embodiment of an ‘idéal anarchiste’.⁴⁶⁰ For Vaneigem it embodies a specific phase in the revolutionary struggle.⁴⁶¹ Vaneigem also argues that Ducasse may have associated himself with an avant-garde group with radical pretensions at around the time of writing *Poésies*.⁴⁶² These ideas are, however, somewhat underdeveloped in the *mémoire*. Indeed, Vaneigem is clear that in many ways his text should be considered as a sketch of a much larger study (he had hoped to continue this research as a doctoral candidate).⁴⁶³ Yet, although the *mémoire* itself was never published and he was not able to take his research further, Vaneigem did later publish a short essay based on some of these considerations that concludes on a much more explicit note: ‘*Maldoror* et les *Poésies* apparaissent en dernier ressort comme le reflet de la double tendance du mouvement anarchiste, de sa perpétuelle oscillation de la violence pure à l’utopie réformatrice’.⁴⁶⁴ In a sense Vaneigem credits Ducasse not only as the forerunner of Surrealism, for which he was well known at the time, but of certain aspects of modern anarchism also. The genius of Ducasse, for Vaneigem, is therefore to have *consciously* expressed something of both the nature of oppressive social forms and what was necessary to combat them.

⁴⁶⁰ ‘Isidore Ducasse’, p. 55. ‘S’il est vrai qu’une pensée nouvelle exige une formulation nouvelle, Ducasse devait, dans son analyse du moi et de sa lutte contre le monde, éprouver le besoin de créer un langage à la mesure de ses révélations, le langage d’une conscience anarchiste. Qu’il y ait réussi, au le langage s’en soit imprégnée tient à son génie, non au hasard’, *ibid.*, p. 179. ‘Sa pensée est anarchiste’, ‘De la part de Lautréamont’, p. 4.

⁴⁶¹ ‘Lautréamont apparaît clairement, dans l’évolution des rapports humains, comme l’épiphénomène d’une phase typique : la lutte spontanée de l’individu opprimé contre la société du nihiliste russe au petit groupe blanquiste, de Stirner à l’anarchie, de Fourier, de Ballanche aux utopistes et réformateurs’, ‘Isidore Ducasse’, p. 35.

⁴⁶² ‘Isidore Ducasse’, p. 146.

⁴⁶³ ‘Ce mémoire doit demeurer plan, esquisse, chantier ouvert à des thèses plus vastes, plus scientifiques, plus proches de la vérité’, ‘De la part de Lautréamont’, p. 7.

⁴⁶⁴ Raoul Vaneigem, ‘Isidore Ducasse et le Comte de Lautréamont dans les ‘Poésies’’, *Synthèses, Revue Internationale*, 151 (1958), pp. 243-249 (p. 249).

The picture of the state of intellectual development that we have described here based on the letters of Vaneigem and his university *mémoire* provide another crucial perspective from which to consider his entry into the Situationist International. They show us that Vaneigem was already driven by a critique of art based on a desire to overcome the constraints of culture. They also reveal a working familiarity with Marxian approaches, such as praxis and totality, that were later to become so key to his critical theory as a Situationist. Moreover, the totalising approach to lived experience that Vaneigem brings to the work of Ducasse is in many ways very similar to the technique he would later employ in the examination of capitalist subjectivity in *Traité*. We can therefore stop thinking of Vaneigem simply as the pupil of Debord and Lefebvre when he joined the SI or as someone whose critical thinking begins with ‘Banalités de base’ in 1962. Instead, we can see him as a person who brought years of his own critical thought to the group as soon as he became a member.

This chapter has established a number of new contexts from which to consider the critical theory of Raoul Vaneigem and his contribution to the SI. Vaneigem came from a working-class family in Belgium’s industrial heartland. It was a region defined by a radical history of class struggle that framed the lives of its inhabitants. Vaneigem lived through a crucial period of the Belgian workers’ movement that saw the largest wildcat strikes in its history. It was in this context that he joined the SI. Vaneigem was also deeply influenced by the Surrealist movement in Hainaut that, like him, was shaped by this radical local culture. It is possible therefore to see Vaneigem as part of this longer tradition of ‘Belgian modernity’. Finally, it is clear from an examination of his earliest writing that Vaneigem had already developed many elements of his critical theory before joining the Situationist International.

Chapter 3. Raoul Vaneigem and the Situationist International (1961-1970)

The aim of this chapter is to provide an historical analysis of the participation of Raoul Vaneigem in the Situationist International from 1961 to 1970. Our main source of information is the *Internationale situationniste* journal as well as various other important texts that Vaneigem helped to create with the other Situationists during his time in the group. The chapter is divided into three parts that roughly cover the main periods of activity: 1961-1964, 1965-1968, 1969-1970. Our goal is to trace the historical contribution of Raoul Vaneigem to the SI as an active participant in the organisation. This is the story of the development and propagation of his critical theory, his collaboration with other members of the Situationist International and his involvement in the events of the Strasbourg Scandal and May '68. We will also examine why he ultimately resigned from the SI in 1970 and what impact this had on the final years of the organisation before its dissolution in 1972.

1961-1964

Raoul Vaneigem joined the SI in the spring of 1961 in the immediate aftermath of Hiver '60. At this time his main points of contact in the group were Guy Debord who would regularly visit Belgium and Attila Kotányi who was a member of the Belgian section of the SI. They would also be the members with whom he would collaborate the most over the coming years. It is perhaps for this reason that his first texts to employ Situationist terminology and theory were two articles on unitary urbanism.⁴⁶⁵ Kotányi, with whom he would have had most contact, had been made head of the

⁴⁶⁵ Raoul Vaneigem and Attila Kotányi, 'Programme élémentaire du bureau d'urbanisme unitaire', *Internationale situationniste*, 6 (August 1961), pp. 16-19; Raoul Vaneigem, 'Commentaire contre l'urbanisme', *Internationale situationniste*, 6 (August 1961), pp. 33-37.

‘bureau d’urbanisme unitaire’ at the Fourth Conference of the SI the previous year.⁴⁶⁶

In these texts Vaneigem develops a critique of the modern humanist ideology that he sees embodied in contemporary urban planning. What is most striking, however, is an apparent move to expand the meaning of ‘situation’ to a definition closer to the general theory of revolutionary praxis described in *Traité*: ‘La destruction situationniste du conditionnement actuel est déjà, en même temps, la construction des situations. C’est la libération des énergies inépuisables contenues dans la vie quotidienne pétrifiée’.⁴⁶⁷ Much more recently, Vaneigem has suggested that, at least by the time he joined the group, the term ‘situationniste’ was more important as a word used to distance the activities of the organisation from contemporary ideologies rather than a specific form of practice.⁴⁶⁸ We can therefore already see a slight shift in emphasis in Situationist theory in these early contributions of Raoul Vaneigem to the SI.

The first major impact Raoul Vaneigem would have on the Situationist International was at the Fifth Conference that occurred in Gothenburg in August 1961. The context for the events of Gothenburg had originated at the previous meeting a year earlier that took place in London. A minority tendency had emerged within the SI grouped for the most part around the German section after a debate about the ‘political’ nature of the organisation. The minority argued against the continued Situationist commitment to proletarian revolution because the workers’ movement, they claimed, was too dominated by its own bureaucracy.⁴⁶⁹ Further, the minority stated that workers were

⁴⁶⁶ *Internationale situationniste*, 5 (December 1960), p. 25

⁴⁶⁷ *Internationale situationniste*, 6 (August 1961), pp. 18.

⁴⁶⁸ ‘Le mot situationniste n’a été qu’un signe de reconnaissance. Sa particularité empêchait de nous confondre avec la tourbe des idéologues’, *Conversation*, p. 12.

⁴⁶⁹ *Internationale situationniste*, 5 (December 1960), p. 20.

satisfied with the current state of affairs and would not struggle against them.⁴⁷⁰ Debord and Kotányi argued vehemently in opposition to these positions, citing the number of recent *grèves sauvages* in advanced capitalist countries.⁴⁷¹ Eventually, the minority was forced to take back its statements.⁴⁷² The fact, however, that a conference of the SI could have been so dominated by such a question as ‘Dans quelle mesure l’I.S. est-elle un mouvement politique?’ demonstrates that there was a lack of clarity on this central ‘political’ dimension of Situationist activity.⁴⁷³

Previous to the strike, Guy Debord seems to have been looking outside of the SI, towards *Socialisme ou barbarie*, for a solution to the ‘politics’ of the group. Debord was for a while a member of Pouvoir Ouvrier, the group behind *SoB*, between 1960 and 1961. In 1960, for example, Guy Debord produced a text with Daniel Blanchard of *SoB* entitled ‘Préliminaires pour une définition de l’unité du programme révolutionnaire’.⁴⁷⁴ This was an extremely important text in defining the future of Situationist critique. Among its novel additions to Situationist theory it elaborated a critique of work and of the increasing hierarchisation, parcellisation and abstraction of life in modern society. Moreover, it situated the notion of Spectacle, non-intervention, in a more explicitly Marxian-inspired critique of hierarchy and alienation. These themes also found expression at this time in *Critique de la séparation*, a film released by Guy Debord in 1961. The relationship between Debord and Pouvoir Ouvrier, however, eventually did not amount to a merger with the SI due to their lack of interest in many of the issues around creativity that the Situationists were posing. The ‘political question’ raised in London was therefore still a very pressing one in 1961.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ See Debord, *Œuvres*, pp. 511-518.

Fortunately for Debord, the events of Hiver '60, discussed in the previous chapter, were an example of working-class spontaneity very close to home that flew in the face of the minority tendency in the SI. Not only had workers in Belgium been some of the highest paid in the world at the time of the strike, they had also aimed much of their violence at workers' parties and unions. The strikes had begun completely unsanctioned and had a revolutionary character that had arguably not been seen in Northern Europe for a generation. In this context it seems likely that, in Raoul Vaneigem, Guy Debord had met a new collaborator who might help him deal with this problem. Raoul Vaneigem was, through his studies, conversant with Western Marxist thought, he shared many of the political views of Guy Debord with regards to workers' autonomy, he wanted a merger of the artistic avant-garde and political action, and he was from the very worker milieu that had been at the heart of events in Belgium. It could be reasonably argued therefore that his break with Pouvoir Ouvrier was partly easier because Guy Debord had made a new intellectual collaboration that could help reorient the SI in the coming years on a more vigorously Marxian-inspired theoretical basis.

At the Gothenburg conference Raoul Vaneigem was to make his first big mark on the orientation of Situationist activity in the coming years. The conference opened with an attempted coup by the minority tendency in the SI. At the London conference the previous year it had been decided that a Central Council would be elected at each conference of the SI.⁴⁷⁵ The Central Council would have ultimate say on the inclusion or exclusion of members in order to keep the standard of membership democratic and international in between conferences.⁴⁷⁶ The minority tendency, however, began

⁴⁷⁵ *Internationale situationniste*, 5 (December 1960), p. 22.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

proceedings in Gothenburg by calling for the autonomy of national sections.⁴⁷⁷ Such a motion, had it been passed, would have allowed the German and English sections, which were more art-oriented and supported the minority tendency, to flood the SI with members who held their position. As a result they could have undemocratically forced their tendency onto the organisation as a whole and would have brought the internationalism of the SI into question.

Although he had not been present at the conference the year previously, Raoul Vaneigem was the first to respond to the minority coup. Serendipitously, and despite not having been a member at the time of the previous conference, Vaneigem had already prepared a 'Rapport d'orientation' for the future of the SI that now proved to be extremely a propos. No doubt this has been done in close collaboration with Debord and Kotányi who had been at the forefront of the original argument. Vaneigem suggests that the disagreement with the minority, what Debord would later term a left-right split, was due to the lack of coherence in Situationist theory. That is to say, the attempted coup by the artists exposed confusion at a theoretical level that needed to be resolved. The effectiveness of the Situationists, Vaneigem argues, lay in the extent to which they escaped the reified thinking and bureaucratic modes of behaviour that characterise capitalist social relations.⁴⁷⁸ The actions of the 'artistic right' of the SI and their uncritical position towards aesthetic production exposed the extent to which these same ways of thinking had entered the organisation.⁴⁷⁹ In order

⁴⁷⁷ *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962), p. 25.

⁴⁷⁸ 'L'Internationale Situationniste se trouve, tant par la conjoncture historique que par son évolution intérieure, à un niveau de développement tel que l'activité qu'elle s'estime en mesure de déployer, dans le monde bureaucratisé et réifié, tient désormais à l'exigence critique qu'elle sera capable de maintenir en elle, comme force de cohésion', *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.* It is Debord who refers to the artists in the SI as the right wing of the group: 'la 'droite' artistique de l'I.S. (voulant faiblement continuer ou seulement répéter l'art moderne)', Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 586.

to resolve this problem, Vaneigem called for a reorientation of the SI around a concept that would act as the linchpin of a new critical and organisational coherence:

Pour que leur élaboration soit *artistique*, au sens nouveau et authentique qu'a défini l'I.S., les éléments de destruction du spectacle doivent précisément cesser d'être des œuvres d'art. Il n'y a pas de *situationnisme*, ni d'œuvre d'art situationniste, ni davantage de situationniste spectaculaire. Une fois pour toutes.

Une telle perspective ne signifie rien si elle n'est pas liée directement à la praxis révolutionnaire, à la volonté de *changer l'emploi de la vie* (ce qui ne peut en rien se ramener au fait de changer *l'employeur* des travaux existants).⁴⁸⁰

Here Vaneigem restates the Situationist position on art, as discussed in the previous chapter, by stressing that it is an alienation of human creativity. Any position as an 'artist', Vaneigem argues, is untenable in the SI. In contrast, he proposes revolutionary praxis, which as we have seen refers to the conscious creation of social relations so that all human beings have control over their own creativity, as the fundamental and totalising starting point for Situationist activity. Such a position also implied that the revolutionary agency of the proletariat was a necessary basis for such totalising transformation. Although Guy Debord was a big part of the move towards such a position, these words were the first time that the theory of praxis was *clearly* established as the ontological starting point for all Situationist practice. Indeed, Vaneigem goes on to say that revolutionary praxis is 'le seul contexte où les situationnistes puissent *parler* de liberté d'action'.⁴⁸¹ Arguably, the incorporation of earlier Situationist developments into a totalising theory of praxis marks the point where the SI becomes the organisation that will have the influence it did on the events of May '68. It is a position that had not been seen before in the avant-garde in the coherent manner it would now be developed by the Situationists, in particular Guy

⁴⁸⁰ *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962), pp. 26-27.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. Vaneigem had made it clear that all of the previous activity of the SI, its critique of art, was to be incorporated into a totalising critique and realisation of human praxis.

The ‘Rapport d’orientation’ was a serious blow to the position of the minority tendency. More so because the majority were in accord with the arguments Vaneigem had outlined. There was no possibility of the coup succeeding and, moreover, it had backfired because the rest of the conference was now devoted to a thorough attack on the minority. Guy Debord followed Vaneigem by saying that he had never made a ‘film situationniste’, upsetting some local Situationist hopefuls who had believed their own work might gain this status.⁴⁸² Attila Kotányi then delivered the crushing statement that the art produced by members of the SI was ‘anti-situationnistes’.⁴⁸³ Although this is a very blunt statement, the extant literature has tended to overlook the qualification that Kotányi gives immediately after. He clearly states that this did not mean that members of the SI had to stop painting or writing.⁴⁸⁴ The problem for Kotányi is that these are not revolutionary activities in themselves.⁴⁸⁵ From a revolutionary perspective, he argues, the most important activity for the SI to be engaging in is the development and propagation of critical theory.⁴⁸⁶

All of these positions were immediately adopted by the majority, putting the minority completely on the defensive. Some of these ‘artists’ openly admitted to not understanding the arguments of Vaneigem and, for one of them, even Situationist theory in general, to which the account of proceedings in the SI review quipped: ‘l’I.S. est la première avant-garde dont un des participants s’admire de ne pas

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ ‘Je ne veux pas dire que quelqu’un doit cesser de peindre, écrire, etc. Je ne veux pas dire que cela n’a pas de valeur. Je ne veux pas dire que nous pourrions continuer d’exister sans faire cela’, *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁵ ‘en même temps, nous savons que tout cela sera envahi par la société, pour servir contre nous’, *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁶ ‘Notre force est dans l’élaboration de certaines vérités, qui ont les pouvoirs brisants de l’explosif, du moment que des gens sont prêts à lutter pour elles’, *ibid.*

comprendre la théorie, qu'il a rejoint [*sic*] depuis plus de deux ans'.⁴⁸⁷ The conference concluded when the German section was forced to agree to unify their ideas with those of the majority as represented in the 'Rapport' given by Raoul Vaneigem.⁴⁸⁸ A new Central Council was elected that included Raoul Vaneigem for the first time.⁴⁸⁹

Since the London conference the previous year Guy Debord and Attila Kotányi had wanted to resolve the problem with the minority tendency. With the input of Raoul Vaneigem their collective efforts in Gothenburg had proved to be a complete success. The three of them, who had originally travelled up to Denmark together, now stopped off in Germany to spend several days in the city of Hamburg on their way back to Belgium. Wishing to build on the impetus provided by the success of the Gothenburg conference, they discussed the future direction of the SI and the clarifications it needed in order to move forward. The result of these debates was the 'Thèses de Hamburg' a set of theses that were the most radical proposals the SI had yet developed. In a strange twist, however, they decided to never write these theses down and to only remember them. Fortunately, Debord would later record the conclusion and importance of the 'Thèses de Hambourg' for posterity in a note written in 1989: 'La conclusion résumée évoquait une célèbre formule de Marx en 1844 (dans sa *Contribution à la critique de la Philosophie du Droit de Hegel*)'.⁴⁹⁰

Given what has already been discussed in Chapter 1 of the current work, it is fair to speculate that the celebrated formula is the same one quoted by Raoul Vaneigem in *Traité* on the nature of radical theory.⁴⁹¹ It would also seem likely due to

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 586.

⁴⁹¹ 'La théorie devient force matérielle lorsqu'elle pénètre les masses. La théorie est capable de pénétrer les masses dès qu'elle fait des démonstrations *ad hominem* et elle fait des démonstrations *ad hominem* dès qu'elle devient radicale. Etre radical, c'est prendre les choses par la racine. Et la racine de l'homme, c'est l'homme lui-même', cited in *Traité*, p. 129-130. See pages 87-89 of the current work for the interpretation Vaneigem gives to these words in *Traité*.

the fact that it echoes the point made by Kotányi above that it is revolutionary theory that should occupy the Situationists most of all. The ‘Thèses de Hambourg’ would therefore lead straight to the theory of revolutionary praxis and radical subjectivity that is presented in *Traité* and *La Société du Spectacle*. It suggests that the *vécu* and theory would become the guiding formula of Situationist activities in coming years. Such speculation is further supported by another statement of Debord in this note that claims the ‘Thèses de Hambourg’ could be reduced to the words: ‘L’I.S. doit, maintenant, réaliser la philosophie’.⁴⁹² This is an obvious reference to the theory of praxis, also termed the Marxian critique of philosophy, as it draws directly on the final thesis of the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ where Marx first fully articulated his theory of praxis. Arguably the ‘Thèses de Hambourg’ therefore represents another moment where Raoul Vaneigem, in partnership with Debord and Kotányi, put forward a reorientation of the Situationist International around the theory of praxis and the basis of what would be his own theory of radical subjectivity.

Debord makes it clear in the same note that the move towards a coherent theory of praxis meant a radical break, not only with the minority tendency within the SI but also with the history of the left since the 1840s.⁴⁹³ The ‘Thèses de Hambourg’ was therefore the point at which the SI started to develop a much more coherent theory of what had gone wrong with the revolutionary tradition, not just in the realm of the avant-garde but in ‘politics’ also. From then on it was the Situationist International alone that was to radicalise the workers’ movement. This process of radicalisation, as has been speculated above, was based primarily upon the Marxian

⁴⁹² Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 585.

⁴⁹³ ‘Elle signifiait à ce moment que l’on ne devrait plus prêter la moindre importance aux conceptions d’aucun des groupes révolutionnaires qui pouvaient subsister encore, en tant qu’héritiers de l’ancien mouvement social d’émancipation anéanti dans la première moitié de notre siècle; et qu’il ne faudrait donc plus compter que sur la seule I.S. pour relancer au plus tôt une autre époque de la contestation, en renouvelant toutes les bases de départ de celle qui s’était constituée dans les années 1840’, *ibid.*, p. 586.

critique of philosophy. It meant that the theory of praxis, alienating and liberating, would now become the clear and central priority of Situationist practice. Debord states that this did not necessarily mean a break with the 'right' or the 'artists' of the SI but that it nonetheless made it highly likely.⁴⁹⁴ Moreover, Debord also states that it was the 'Theses de Hambourg' that led to the impact of the SI on the events of May '68.⁴⁹⁵ The 'Thèses de Hambourg' is important therefore because it situates Raoul Vaneigem squarely at the centre of a crucial moment in the history of the SI. His input appears to be a central component of the transformation that was to take place.

The artistic right of the SI was eventually excluded early the following year in January 1962. As a member of the Central Council, Raoul Vaneigem voted in favour of the exclusion. The practical reason for the rupture with this large swathe of members was that the German section had refused to make the changes to its journal demanded at the end of the Gothenburg conference by the rest of the SI. Vaneigem signed and contributed to a number of texts on the exclusion.⁴⁹⁶ The excluded members were henceforth referred to as Nashists, after the most prominent member of their tendency Jørgen Nash (brother of Asger Jorn), and their brand of ideology was termed Nashism.⁴⁹⁷ The timing of this rupture was, however, a problem because almost immediately after it the Spur group, which made up the excluded German section, had come under attack from the West German state. Copies of its journals were seized and a number of members arrested. Under the circumstances the SI proper published statements in support of them in as far as they were being targeted

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ See Raoul Vaneigem, Guy Debord, Attila Kotányi, Uwe Lausen, 'Nicht Hinauslehnen', 10 February 1962; also, by the same authors, 'Proclamation from l'Internationale situationniste!', 18 March 1962.

⁴⁹⁷ See 'L'opération contre-situationniste dans divers pays', *Internationale situationniste*, 8 (January 1963), pp. 23-29.

by the government.⁴⁹⁸ Once this affair had blown over, several of the excluded artists would start a short-lived Second Situationist International, including an English journal, *The Situationist Times*, directed by Jacqueline de Jong.⁴⁹⁹ This group, however, never gained any traction and was disbanded not long after its creation.

In the months and years that followed the reorientation of the Situationist International on the basis outlined in the ‘Thèses de Hambourg’, a number of important elaborations were produced. One of the first was ‘Sur la Commune’, a set of theses by Vaneigem, Debord and Kotányi that not only embodied an analysis of a concrete historical moment, the Paris Commune of 1871, but also began to clarify and expand the Situationist critique of the traditional left.⁵⁰⁰

The Commune was a revolutionary movement that began as a result of the collapse of the Second Empire during the disastrous Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and as a rejection of the establishment of the 3rd French Republic after a bitterly fought siege of Paris. The Commune held Paris as a self-governing direct democracy from the 18th of March to the 28th of May 1871. The city was run through a system of instantly recallable delegates, directly elected and who received the same wages as the average worker. After a week of intense fighting and summary executions, termed la Semaine sanglante, the Commune was brutally suppressed by bourgeois forces, les Versaillais. It is estimated that in the region of twenty thousand Parisians were either killed in the fighting or executed. Many more were later sent into exile or to hard labour in prison colonies abroad. Although the Communards held to a vast array of

⁴⁹⁸ Raoul Vaneigem, Michèle Bernstein, Jeppesen Martin and Alexander Trocchi, ‘Déclaration sur le procès contre l’Internationale situationniste en Allemagne fédérale’, 25 June 1962.

⁴⁹⁹ *The Situationist Times: Facsimile Box Set* (New York: Boo-Hooray, 2013).

⁵⁰⁰ Raoul Vaneigem, Guy Debord, Attila Kotányi, ‘Thèses sur la Commune’, 18 March 1962, *Internationale situationniste*, 12 (September 1969), pp. 109-111.

different political opinions, from Republicanism to Anarchism, the most prominent political ideologies were a mixture of Blanquism and Proudhonism.⁵⁰¹

The Commune had always been an important and much fought-over point of reference for the modern revolutionary tradition. As was noted in Chapter 2, for example, the anarchist tradition had seen it as a historical moment around which to rally. The Marxist tradition had also adopted the Paris Commune, in part because Marx had written in its defence, but also because, previous to the Russian Revolution, it embodied the largest historical proletarian revolutionary movement in history. The official left therefore wished to recuperate this glorious story into its own discourse, but primarily, particularly in the case of the Communist Party, it used its *failure* as a historical justification for its hierarchical and authoritarian theories and practices. Lenin, for example, was obsessed with the Commune and compared its failure to that of the 1905 Russian Revolution. Lenin therefore saw the Bolshevik Revolution, erroneously as far as the SI were concerned, as the realisation of the Communard movement. Under the USSR the Commune was turned into something of a Soviet cult. Lenin was buried in a Communard flag and, even more strangely, the Soviets sent a shred from another into space in 1962. The symbolism is rather ironic given that the Bolsheviks, Lenin and Trotsky included, persecuted anarchist workers ruthlessly.

As we saw above, Vaneigem, Debord and Kotányi argued for both a return to the origins of the workers' movement begun in the 1840s and a rejection of its later developments embodied in the left. In the first thesis of 'Sur la Commune' Vaneigem and the others quote from an editorial from the SI's journal where this position is clarified further. In it they state that the leftist definition of the success and failure of

⁵⁰¹ For an overview of the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune, see Alistair Horne, *The Fall of Paris 1870-71: The Siege and the Commune* (London: Penguin, 2007)

the revolutionary workers' movement needs to be turned on its head.⁵⁰² Leftist reforms and the state bureaucracy of the Eastern Bloc may well be presented as successes but they are in fact terrible failures. In contrast, failed insurrections, such as the Commune of 1871 and the Asturian miners' strike of 1934, were in fact great successes because they revealed the possibilities of a genuine social movement of emancipation.

These statements are part of a crucial discourse in Situationist writing that seeks to clear away the legacy of Democratic-Socialism and, what we might call, the revolutionary reformism of the Communist Parties. Part of this task, as has already been discussed to some extent in Chapter 1 of the current work, involved a return to the work of Marx. This effort to read Marx (and Engels) against Marxism is an important methodological step present in 'Sur la Commune'.

The Situationists note that Marx said that the Commune's greatest social measure was its own existence in acts.⁵⁰³ They interpret this to mean that the Communards had become masters of their own history at the level of 'la vie quotidienne'.⁵⁰⁴ They cite the games that Communards played with their weapons as examples of the insurgents 'playing' (*jouer*) with power.⁵⁰⁵ Another example that Vaneigem and the others give is the destruction of symbols of power during the Commune.⁵⁰⁶ This they call the first historical realisation of unitary urbanism.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰² 'Il faut reprendre l'étude du mouvement ouvrier classique d'une manière désabusée, et d'abord désabusée quant à ses diverses sortes d'héritiers politiques ou pseudo-théoriques, car ils ne possèdent que l'héritage de son échec. Les succès apparents de ce mouvement sont ses échecs fondamentaux (le réformisme ou l'installation d'une bureaucratie étatique) et ses échecs (la Commune ou la révolte des Asturies) sont jusqu'ici ses succès ouverts, pour nous et pour l'avenir', *Internationale situationniste*, 7 (April 1962), p. 12; cited in 'Sur la Commune', op. cit., p. 109.

⁵⁰³ 'Sur la Commune', p. 109.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ 'La Commune représente jusqu'à nous la seule réalisation d'un urbanisme révolutionnaire, s'attaquant sur le terrain aux signes pétrifiés de l'organisation dominante de la vie, reconnaissant l'espace social en termes politiques, ne croyant pas qu'un monument puisse être innocent', *ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 110.

Thus, in opposition to traditional leftist readings of the Commune, the Situationists suggest that what Marx celebrated was precisely its directly democratic quality. Indeed, they take Engels proclamation that the Commune was ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ to mean that workers’ power precisely does *not* mean a dictatorial state bureaucracy in its name.⁵⁰⁸ Significantly, they suggest that this everyday aspect was more important than the ‘governmental’ proclamations made by the Commune.⁵⁰⁹ This would suggest that, in trying to understand the Commune and its significance for our times, we should look at the subjective desires implied in its actions rather than its merely explicit intentions. This is made clear by Vaneigem, Debord and Kotányi when, citing Engels directly, they effectively state that the role of the Situationists, and revolutionary praxis in general, is to make conscious what was unconscious in the Commune.⁵¹⁰ Such a task, they state, is necessary because the social struggle embodied in the Commune of 1871 is essentially the same as the one that faces us today.⁵¹¹ For the Situationists, those who say that the Commune was a failure are simply missing the point: ‘pour ceux qui ont vécu l’événement, le dépassement était là’.⁵¹² This is why they famously term it the greatest ‘festival’ or ‘party’ (*fête*) of the nineteenth century.⁵¹³

Where much of the left has used the Commune as a lesson that justified the reproduction of hierarchical social relations within the workers’ movement, Vaneigem and the other Situationists argue that its suppression was due to its failure to abolish such social relations during its existence. The failure of the Communards to

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 109.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ ‘Pour le travail de ‘rendre conscientes les tendances inconscientes de la Commune’ (Engels), le dernier mot n’est pas dit’, *ibid.* p. 111.

⁵¹¹ ‘La guerre sociale dont la Commune est un moment dure toujours (quoique ses conditions superficielles aient beaucoup changé)’, *ibid.*

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Ibid., p. 109.

seize the money in the National Bank, for example, was because the building was protected by the belief in property.⁵¹⁴ The use of barricades, in turn, was a completely defeatist strategy that was simply repeated due to the memory of 1848 (modern artillery made it pointless and the Communards, most historians agree, would probably have won if they had marched on the Versailles straightaway).⁵¹⁵ The Situationists therefore conclude: ‘La Commune de Paris a été vaincue moins par la force des armes que par la force de l’habitude’.⁵¹⁶ In ‘Sur la Commune’ this statement is linked relatively explicitly to the problem of theory. The enemies of human emancipation actually have an ally in revolutionaries themselves due to the implantation of bourgeois ideology in them: ‘La véritable ‘cinquième colonne’ est dans l’esprit même des révolutionnaires’.⁵¹⁷ Again we see here this emphasis on the importance of the development of a critique of ideology and the propagation of radical theory that was so central to the Situationist project particularly in this period after the exclusion of the artists. ‘Sur la Commune’ therefore marks a deepening of the Situationists attack on the left and the importance it places on the power of critical thought.⁵¹⁸

Along with these collaborative efforts, the critical theory of Raoul Vaneigem began to develop within *Internationale situationniste*. It was in ‘Banalités de base’, published in two parts between 1962 and 1963, that, as the title implies, the most fundamental aspects of this critical theory were first clearly presented for a wider readership. ‘Banalités’ was important in terms of establishing a clear critical ontology for

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., p. 110.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ ‘Sur la Commune’ also became the artefact behind the rupture with Henri Lefebvre who was accused of plagiarising the text in an article for the journal *Arguments*. See ‘Aux poubelles de l’histoire’, *Internationale situationniste*, 12 (September 1969), p. 108-111.

Situationist activity. In this respect it can be easily imagined Raoul Vaneigem had an influence on the development of *La Société du Spectacle* by Guy Debord. Equally, it was through and within the SI's journal that Raoul Vaneigem was able to incorporate and contribute to aspects of Situationist critique that were developed previous to 1961 such as unitary urbanism. In the editorial notes, also, the influence of Raoul Vaneigem becomes extremely prominent and it is quite likely that he penned several sections alone.⁵¹⁹ It was also in this period, from 1963 until early 1965, that Raoul Vaneigem was actually writing *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, which must have greatly influenced the critical discussion with the SI.

These texts, where the critical theory discussed in Chapter 1 was first presented, marked a change in the discussion that would in certain respects help to define the later periods of the SI. The critique becomes far more coherently totalising, the language more inspired by Marx and the focus is on the generalisation of alienation in capitalist society. The critique of the traditional workers' movement, moreover, had taken centre stage. It could be argued that the essence of Situationist critique was developed long before 1961. However, this would be to overlook the fact that it was Raoul Vaneigem who did a great deal of the work to clarify these positions into a coherent critical theory in these texts. 'Banalités' and *Traité*, as was recognised by Guy Debord and other members of the Situationist International, marked a qualitative leap in Situationist critique towards the events of May '68.

⁵¹⁹ The most obvious example is the editorial notes to issue 7 of the SI's journal (the same edition that contained the first part of 'Banalités de base'). Here, the arguments of Raoul Vaneigem around the ideology of survival are first developed. Also, there is much greater focus on actual working-class actions and the development of a critique of the history of the workers' movement later outlined in 'Sur la Commune'. According to Debord, see pages 28-29 of the current work, Vaneigem was, moreover, an important source of input in these editorial notes throughout the period 1961-1964.

1965-1968

Raoul Vaneigem completed the manuscript of *Traité* early in 1965. Over the course of the next year the manuscript would be passed among the French-speaking members of the SI.⁵²⁰ There is not a great deal of documentary evidence on the details of how the book was received within the organisation. However, the letter by Debord, discussed in the Introduction to the current work, as well as the generally respected position Vaneigem had within the SI confirms that it was certainly held in great esteem by other members. Indeed, as *Spectacle* was still in the process of being written, *Traité* embodied the first major book to be completed by any member of the SI. It is not clear, however, if either of these texts would have gained the wide readership they came to enjoy had it not been for the so-called Strasbourg Scandal, an event that would make the Situationist International notorious in the years before May '68.

The Strasbourg Scandal began in the spring of 1966 when several 'extrémiste' members of the student body of the University of Strasbourg were elected to run the student union.⁵²¹ These student representatives stood in opposition to the university bureaucracy but, according to the SI review, after the election many students were afraid that the negative desires of the base that were the impetus behind the election would find no real expression.⁵²² Several members of the student body who were readers of its review wrote to the Situationist International asking for advice on how to realise these desires.⁵²³ In response, the SI suggested that a totalising social critique

⁵²⁰ A copy of one of the original manuscripts of *Traité* circulated within the SI, with some material expunged from the published version, can be consulted in Amsterdam. See Raoul Vaneigem, 'Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations' (manuscript, The René Vienet Archive, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 1965).

⁵²¹ For the Situationist account of events in Strasbourg, see 'Nos buts et nos méthodes dans le scandale de Strasbourg', *Internationale situationniste*, 11 (October 1967), pp. 23-31, (p. 23).

⁵²² Ibid., p. 23.

⁵²³ Ibid.

of the student movement needed to be created, first, because the problematic the movement sought to address needed to be clarified, and secondly, because the only really useful quality that election to the student union had given the student body were funds that could be used in a non-conformist way (that is to say, to pay for a publication of just such a critique).⁵²⁴ The students were in agreement and began to develop a critique with the SI, engaging for the most part with Mustapha Khayati, that later became the infamous *De la misère en milieu étudiant*.⁵²⁵

The text was a total attack on the student as an identity and social role. The Situationists argued that students were laughable, the most despised group after priests and policemen and the second social group, after old women, to profess a religious faith.⁵²⁶ Students believe they are autonomous from the dominant system but in fact they embody the mystification of the spectacle.⁵²⁷ Being a future young professional, the student turns his or her material poverty into a lifestyle that is equivalent, as it is temporary, to any other form of consumerism.⁵²⁸ Indeed, students also embody the values of consumer culture.⁵²⁹ Worse, they believe themselves to be avant-garde because they have seen the latest Godard movie or read the latest philosophical text.⁵³⁰ In other words, the Situationists stated that there was nothing inherently non-conformist about being a student. On the contrary, students embodied the passivity of Spectacular bourgeois social relations.

The Situationists then devoted their attention to a critique of various aspects of the contemporary student movement. The very notion of a student movement or

⁵²⁴ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

⁵²⁵ Situationist International, *De la misère en milieu étudiant, Considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier* [1966] (Paris: Zanzara athée, 2011).

⁵²⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵²⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

‘révolte des jeunes’ was, they argued, a Spectacular ideology that tried to fragment what was in fact a totalising movement against capitalist society.⁵³¹ Within this movement the most reactionary element were those, such as the student unions, who wanted structural reforms to the university and student life.⁵³² The SI went on to critique the *blousons noirs*, the Provos, the various Communist groups such as the JCR and the anarchists for placing ideological constraints on the movement and impeding its radical impetus, in particular the emphasis on anti-Vietnam demonstrations.⁵³³ Indeed, the SI argued that students were the most content group in society to be ‘politisé’, that is to say, to give over their radical potential to an ideology.⁵³⁴ In contrast, the Situationists argued, students had to reject their studies as the worker rejects their labour.⁵³⁵ Moreover, this could only be done if the student movement became a total movement against capital, connecting up with the proletariat and being part of the establishing of the organisation of workers’ councils whose primary aim would be to abolish work in favour of free human creativity.⁵³⁶

Those students who had been elected as representatives on the student union were encouraged by the SI to spend the entirety of its available funds to publish this text. In November 1966, 10,000 copies of *De la misère* were printed and distributed throughout the university; the elected students then resigned their posts. Throughout the University of Strasbourg, posters by the SI began to appear, while students were encouraged to break up lectures and occupy the buildings on campus. Eventually what was to become known as the Strasbourg Scandal came to an end once the five elected students became the subject of court proceedings. The court case was, however, a

⁵³¹ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵³² Ibid., p. 7.

⁵³³ Ibid., p. 14-16.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

triumph for the SI, bringing them instant fame in the student milieu and notoriety in the French press.

How far Raoul Vaneigem was involved in these events is unclear. He did take part in the writing of *De la misère* and the manuscript of *Traité* was no doubt an important point of reference, certain phraseology and ideas reappearing in the text. Moreover, Raoul Vaneigem became the focus of a strange attempted coup by some of the students newly associated with the Situationists; this suggests that at the very least he was an important point of contact for them. Bourseiller states, based on an interview with Daniel Joubert, that several members of the SI and students tried to exclude Guy Debord and Attila Kotányi from the SI: 'Ils comptaient sur Vaneigem et presque tous les autres'.⁵³⁷ These members were then excluded for this manoeuvre, Vaneigem and the rest of the SI being uninterested in any such move.⁵³⁸ Despite the lack of detailed information, however, it is clear that Vaneigem, along with Debord, was an important figure in the events of Strasbourg, both in discussions and, perhaps, on the ground.

The Strasbourg Scandal could not have come at a better time for the publication of *Traité* and *Spectacle*. Michèle Bernstein had taken up the role of finding a publisher for *Traité* with little success. Debord had originally read the manuscript of *Traité* at the start of 1965 and it was now almost 1967. *Traité* was sent to thirteen publishers all of whom rejected the publication. Before Strasbourg Vaneigem was just an obscure member of a radical revolutionary group, after it he was considered one of the chief theorists of the infamous Situationist International who had captured the minds of

⁵³⁷ Bourseiller, p. 310.

⁵³⁸ The exclusion was announced in a tract entitled 'Attention! Trois provocateurs', 22 January 1967, signed by Raoul Vaneigem among many others members of the SI. Vaneigem would later write a text on how critical incoherence led to the emergence of this secret sect within the SI, see Raoul Vaneigem, 'Avoir pour vérité la pratique', *Internationale situationniste*, 11 (October 1967).

French youth. The last publishing house to pronounce its verdict was Gallimard. On the same day Raoul Vaneigem received a rejection letter from Gallimard and then later that evening a telegram stating that the book had been accepted.⁵³⁹ What had made the difference, according to Vaneigem writing in the Preface to the second edition, was an article in *Le Figaro littéraire* the day he received these communications that incriminated the influence of the SI on the Provos in Amsterdam. Gallimard clearly believed that it could profit from the notoriety the Situationists had earned since Strasbourg.

Perhaps as a result of the funds gained from the book deal, Raoul Vaneigem decided to do a tour of the United States of America in the summer of 1967. The aim of the trip, apart from the experience itself, was to establish an American section of the Situationist International. Vaneigem spoke English and his 'Banalités de base' had already been translated as *The Totality for Kids* in the US. The Situationists had, moreover, been alerted to the possibility of bringing the members of the journal *Black Mask* into the organisation; a move that the English section of the SI had encouraged. When Raoul Vaneigem arrived in New York, however, this proved impossible. Vaneigem met with Hoffman, one of the chief contributors to *Black Mask*, who gave a mystical interpretation of 'Banalités'.⁵⁴⁰ As a result Vaneigem refused to meet with Ben Morea, the main figure in *Black Mask*, on the grounds that the SI and the members of this journal disagreed on fundamental issues.⁵⁴¹ The American section was still formed, however, with others Vaneigem met in the US.

On returning to Europe, it turned out that Ben Morea had written to the English section complaining that he had been misrepresented to Vaneigem. The English section were annoyed at these events and wrote to Paris asking that Morea be

⁵³⁹ *Traité*, p. 10.

⁵⁴⁰ *Internationale situationniste*, 11 (October 1967), p. 83.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*

given the reasons Vaneigem had not met with him. Vaneigem travelled to London to explain what had happened in person and said that this would be agreed to if the English section then refused to communicate with Morea again. A collective letter was then sent to Morea from Paris. Morea, however, rejected the account Vaneigem had given and then attacked the members of the newly-formed American section. Despite agreeing not to, the English section then wrote to Morea again. As the English section refused to break contact with Morea they were finally excluded by the Central Council of the SI, which included Vaneigem.⁵⁴²

The next important event in the history of the contribution of Raoul Vaneigem to the SI was the actual publication of *Traité*, a little over two weeks after *Spectacle*, by Gallimard on the 30th of November 1967. The publication of these two texts just a few months before the events of May '68 is widely, albeit contentiously, considered in the extant literature and for many of those involved as an important correlation. Some consider these texts to have predicted May '68. Others, that they simply expressed the spirit of the moment. Writing in the Preface to the second edition, Raoul Vaneigem sees *Traité* as a book that both described its epoch and, more importantly, changed it.⁵⁴³ Indeed, in his later work, Vaneigem compares the influence of the Situationists to that of the encyclopaedists of the Enlightenment.⁵⁴⁴ In the context of his own critical theory it is certainly feasible to see *Traité* as a text that contributed to a transformation of society or, at the very least, the radicalisation of a social movement.

⁵⁴² For details of the exclusion, see *ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

⁵⁴³ 'Un livre qui se veut la lecture d'une époque témoigne seulement d'une histoire au devenir imprécis; un livre qui change l'époque propage aussi dans le champ des mutations futures le germe du changement', *Traité*, p. 9.

⁵⁴⁴ 'Bien que les idées situationnistes soient restées, pendant des décennies, sous la chape du silence, leur influence n'a pas été moindre que celle, en leur temps, des encyclopédistes, de Diderot, de Rousseau, de Voltaire, de Hegel, de Marx', *Entre le deuil*, p. 35.

Vaneigem assumes, based on lived experience, that everyone in a hierarchical social relationship is made unhappy by that situation. The human *volonté de vivre*, or the subjective dimension of human practice, is placed under constraints in this context. In the critical thought of Vaneigem every single human being struggles against this. The problem, however, is that human relationships are mystified by the fragmentary nature of hierarchy. As such it is difficult, though by no means impossible, for human beings to grasp experience as the product of the totality of social relationships. For this reason, while there have always been social movements of emancipation and individual resistance, these have always been mystified or fetishistic. That is to say, the emancipatory impulse is diverted by an illusion of emancipation embodied in one or several fetishes.

In a sense, therefore, capitalism thrives on its own negation. It offers illusory forms of emancipation in the form of fragments of itself that are played off against other fragments. Emancipation from suffering is offered in the form of the purchase of commodities, in religion, in voting for a political party, in being rich, or in being poor, in being a member of the working class as a positive identity or taking part in a union. Even 'revolutionary' illusions are offered in the form of 'Communist' states and Trotskyist parties. In a certain sense, even the most inhuman of practices, such as fascism, as discussed in Chapter 1 of the current work, can be understood as fetishised movements of emancipation. These social movements and individual forms of resistance are illusory because they actually reinforce the reproduction of hierarchical social relationships because they never contest them as a totality nor therefore contain a self-critique. In a bizarre sense hierarchy appears as an emancipation from itself.

Vaneigem and Guy Debord approach something close to this argument from slightly different directions. The role of both these texts, however, is to act as a source

of critique of the illusions that emancipatory movements and individuals labour under. The social movement is already there; the point is to radicalise it. In many ways, therefore, *Traité* and *Spectacle* are the later form of the arguments that were first developed with an engagement with Marx in the 'Thèses de Hambourg'. They engage the creatively conscious dimension of human practice in a process of self-critique that can be objectified in the form of new social relationships. At the same time, this is only possible if the Situationists engage with the lived experience, the real contemporary social praxis, which defines human life as it now stands. Those who wish to interpret *Traité* as expressing the 'spirit of May '68' ignore the fact that it is precisely this understanding of capitalist social relations, of illusory emancipation, and the transformation of social relationships that authentic liberation need take, that makes, at least in their own eyes, Vaneigem and Guy Debord such influential figures. Moreover, if anything, these were the lessons learned from Hiver '60, along with the whole history of the left as had been stated in 'Sur la Commune', and hardly from a moment that had yet to occur. The extent, however, to which these lessons came to radicalise the Movement of Occupations in May '68 is, of course, highly debatable.

The Movement of Occupations began on Friday the 3rd of March 1968 when fighting broke out between police and students in and around the Sorbonne University. The riot had begun in response to disciplinary action taken against students who had been involved in actions in Nanterre, including one René Riesel who was to become a member of the SI. The critical theory of the Situationists had been spreading in campuses throughout France after Strasbourg and *De la misère* was now a major source of reference. This had radicalised parts of the student movement that were now

engaged in a campaign against the university. In an attempt to crack down on the individuals involved, the government sent in the police to arrest militants. Over the next weeks there was to be bloody fighting between students and police. Buildings throughout the Latin Quarter were occupied. Members of the Situationists, Guy Debord and Vaneigem included, were physically present in Paris during these events and taking part in the organising and fighting. While there were many factions, the Situationists put forward the most radical ideas, arguing that the real impetus behind the movement was not a need for reform but for the total abolition of capitalism.

The fact that workers' went on strike in support of the students against the wishes of union and party representatives began to make the latter desire a real possibility. Three quarters of the French workforce went on strike, while students and revolutionaries controlled a large part of central Paris. The SI took part in the formation of a Committee of Occupations that organised the occupation of the Sorbonne and called for the occupation of all factories. However, they were hampered by reformists in the student union and soon the Committee was over taken by leftist revolutionaries. The SI therefore decided to form a *Comité pour la maintenance des occupations* (CMDO) that was based on Situationist membership. Throughout these events Raoul Vaneigem was present in Paris and helped to organise actions. He also composed a revolutionary song, 'La Vie s'écoule, la vie s'enfuit'.⁵⁴⁵ The actions of the SI seem to have consisted primarily in propagating radical theory to guide the movement.

It is obviously incredibly difficult to gauge exactly how influential Raoul Vaneigem or Guy Debord were during the events of May '68. Many of the phrases and ideas of the Situationists found expression on banners and in graffiti on the walls

⁵⁴⁵ Raoul Vaneigem, 'La Vie s'écoule, la vie s'enfuit', *Pour en finir avec le travail, Chansons du prolétariat révolutionnaire* [1974] (Paris: EPM, 1998), CD.

of the Latin Quarter. It is interesting to note that one of the most famous of these, ‘Je prends mes désirs pour des réalités car je crois à la réalité de mes désirs’, often attributed to the SI in the media seems to be inspired by Louis Scutenaire: ‘Désirs sont réalités’.⁵⁴⁶ At the Sorbonne, a banner was hung proclaiming Vaneigem’s famous phrase, ‘Ceux qui parlent de révolution et de lutte de classes sans se référer explicitement à la vie quotidienne [...] ceux-là ont dans la bouche un cadavre’.⁵⁴⁷ Elsewhere Situationist slogans filled the streets. The graffiti, however, does not prove that Vaneigem nor Debord were that influential. At the same time, it is easy to gauge that the actual insights of *Traité* and *Spectacle* had not sufficiently implanted themselves in the student movement in order to provide it with enough radical theory to overcome the limitations of its reformist tendencies. The Situationists were influential but at the same time it was not the number of people who followed their ideas that mattered so much as providing the most radical ideas at the most opportune moment.

In the event the movement eventually collapsed due to a lack of direction and the inability to see that it brought the totality of capitalism into question. French workers went back to work after an agreement was reached with employers and the student movement collapsed.⁵⁴⁸ At the same time, the movement had changed the discourse in France and exploded any idea that a modern consumer society had overcome its inherently alienating way of life. In the streets of Paris human beings had been attempting to establish a total transformation of social relationships in a manner that had arguably not been seen since the Paris Commune of 1871.

⁵⁴⁶ Louis Scutenaire, p. 139.

⁵⁴⁷ *Traité*, p. 32.

⁵⁴⁸ Vaneigem wrote a letter to a comrade in America recording the end of the occupations, see Raoul Vaneigem, unpublished letter to Robert Chasse, c. May 1968, ‘Archives of the Situationist International’, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

The possibility that *Traité* was more widely read than *Spectacle* during May '68 is one that invites consideration. In many respects both of the works were putting forward a fundamentally similar perspective on the role of fetishism in the recuperation of emancipatory movements and on the inhumanity of everyday life in capitalist society. The styles of these two works are, however, very different. *Spectacle* was clearly written as a work of high theory in a tone that is decidedly intellectual. In contrast *Traité* is a surprising pastiche of genres of writing driven by a poetic prose that actively seeks to avoid the language of high theory. Indeed, *Traité* is surprisingly difficult to pin down and categorise, which is part of its appeal.

In some respects *Traité* draws on the proletarian literature tradition. In particular the emphasis it places on the *vécu*, on hierarchical social relations as they are experienced concretely—that is with the rich complexity of subjective experience—, links *Traité* with authors such as Malva, who in turn is drawing on a tradition of honest examination of lived experience that goes as far back as Rousseau and even Montaigne. No doubt a huge part of the appeal of the book over *Spectacle* is that it speaks to our lived experiences, to the total being, and not just the intellect. In this sense *Traité* also attains a certain level of poetic immediacy in its discourse that connects up with the writing of Nietzsche, an important intellectual influence on the book, and transcends a purely theoretical grounding. Indeed, as was discussed in Chapter 1 of the current work, for Vaneigem radical poetry and theory are one and the same.

Another major element of *Traité* that is absent from *La Société du Spectacle* is the genre of encyclopaedia. Vaneigem has always been a collator of useful information. In the 1960s he began, with other Situationists, to contribute to the *Encyclopédie du Monde Actuel*, and more recently he has become an important

contributor to the *Encyclopaedia universalis* online. He has also written a collection of citations and his *Les Controverses du christianisme* is an A-Z of Christian theology from his radical perspective. Vaneigem is, moreover, a lifelong admirer of Diderot. As such, *Traité* also, it can be argued, is situated in the tradition of an encyclopaedia of the ‘liberal arts’, the arts that set one free in the mind and from manual labour, though with the radical edge that it is an encyclopaedia of the revolutionary arts, freeing the reader from all hierarchical separations. The text refers to radical moments, people, and ideas from throughout the course of human history, from the work of Schopenhauer and Marx to the mystical heresies of the Middle Ages and the Anarchists of the nineteenth century. The book is a total guide to art, politics, music, language, theory and the human imagination. Part of the appeal of this book is therefore its strongly didactic flavour that introduces the reader to an entire world of hidden history largely unknown outside the most radical circles.

This latter aspect also finds expression in what is perhaps the hidden secret of *Traité*, its basis in the collected works of Isidore Ducasse, le Comte de Lautréamont. The title of *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations* is a pun on the idea of giving a guide on ‘how to live’ (*savoir vivre*) and a guide to ‘good manners’ (*savoir-vivre*). The book is therefore openly didactic but also in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Indeed, this is a guide on how not to have ‘good manners’ in the sense of reproducing social norms and relationships. It is quite possible, given the huge influence of Ducasse on him since his university *mémoire*, that Vaneigem is referring here to the moment in *Les Chants de Maldoror* when the eponymous anti-hero advises a child he finds crying in a park in Paris to become a thief and a murderer. Maldoror offers the child consolation in a cynical assessment of modern human affairs, arguing that he should embrace the inherent evil of bourgeois society and

embody its violence. In this context Raoul Vaneigem would be Maldoror advising young generations in a similarly lucid and negative manner. Such a reading is supported by the fact that the splitting of *Traité* into a negative and positive part reflects Vaneigem's own reading of the work of Ducasse. For Vaneigem *Maldoror* embodies the work of a negative critique from the perspective of power. *Poésies*, on the other hand, is the corollary positive critique necessary for a liberated society that escapes the nihilism of pure destruction. The structure of *Traité* reflects this exact same schema, being divided into 'La perspective du pouvoir' and 'Le renversement de perspective'.

In the period 1965-1968 Raoul Vaneigem was therefore crucial to the history of the Situationist International in a number of ways. First, as a member of the SI he was a contributor to the organisation and radicalisation of the Student movement. Secondly, he continued to be an important member on the level of internal politics as the exclusion of the English section and the establishment of an American section demonstrates. Thirdly, he took part in the Situationist presence during the events of May '68 and his major work, *Traité*, had a limited but radicalising influence on those who took part in the Movement of Occupations. Moreover, many of these developments had been made possible by his collaborative and individually achieved work in *Internationale situationniste* between 1961 and 1964.

1969-1970

Immediately after the events of May '68 the Situationist International seemed far from approaching its dissolution. The group had been an important part of the most

radical moment of French history in over a hundred years and its ideas had begun to spread on an international scale. In exile in Belgium, the Situationists wrote up an account of events from their own perspective, entitled *Enragés et Situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations*.⁵⁴⁹ Relations between Debord and Vaneigem were good and, as after Hiver '60, there was a sense that the historical moment had changed. The SI now had to reorient itself in order to be at the avant-garde of the revolutionary movement. Over the next couple of years, however, the internal debate and practice of this new period was to prove extremely problematic.

Between the 25th of September and the 1st of October 1969, the Eighth Conference of the Situationist International took place in Venice.⁵⁵⁰ In many respects the conference could be seen as a repeat of the confusion, though over a different topic, that had reigned at the London conference in 1960. There was no clarity about exactly how the SI was to adapt to the new historical conditions that had been created by the events of May '68. Moreover, there was also a movement back to an earlier form of organisation. The Central Council was dissolved and replaced with an organisational system not unlike what had existed in 1957. National sections were to be given much greater autonomy in terms of exclusions and delegations from national sections was to meet regularly between conferences. Debord was unimpressed by the arguments put forward by Vaneigem in Venice about the need for coherence and his insistence that there could be no disagreements within the group.

In the twelfth, and final, issue of *Internationale situationniste* published in September 1969 the consensus was that the events of the previous year were, like the Commune before it, a combination of success and failure. For those who had lived the event, in many ways theory had been realised. On the other hand, the movement had

⁵⁴⁹ René Vienet, *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

⁵⁵⁰ For an account of the conference, see Debord, *Œuvres*, pp. 1134-1144.

ultimately been defeated, like the Commune, by old habits. The failure of the movement was in large part due to a failure to implement the directly democratic organisation of society. The twelfth issue of the SI's journal therefore elaborated the position of establishing workers' councils with a view to creating 'autogestion généralisée' or generalised self-management. In other words, the movement had failed because it had not taken on the reorganisation of everyday life and its resources. From now on the Situationists proposed to call for the creation of workers' councils.

The contribution of Vaneigem in this respect was a series of twenty-one theses entitled 'Avis aux civilisés relativement à l'autogestion généralisée' published in this twelfth issue.⁵⁵¹ Vaneigem argues that May '68 had propagated the necessity of overcoming capitalism but only in a confused manner.⁵⁵² He claims that everyone who took part in the events of May '68 felt the possibility of a total transformation of everyday life.⁵⁵³ However, this instinct had not been realised in practice. Vaneigem therefore argues that the creation of workers' councils is the crucial social form that would make such a transformation possible by generalising human autonomy.⁵⁵⁴ He notes that the most common objection to totalising change is the accusation that revolutionaries had nothing with which to replace the current system.⁵⁵⁵ Yet in revolutionary moments the proletariat rediscover the complete history of its struggle.⁵⁵⁶ Most important was the experience of a society of workers' councils (by implication this included the most prominent examples of the Paris Commune and the Spanish Revolution).⁵⁵⁷ Vaneigem argues that during May '68 many people had felt

⁵⁵¹ Raoul Vaneigem, 'Avis aux civilisés relativement à l'autogestion généralisée', *Internationale situationniste*, pp. 74-79.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

the necessity of rejecting any organisation that was not the direct emanation of the proletariat.⁵⁵⁸ Workers' councils embody the most powerful social organisation that can meet this need.⁵⁵⁹

Vaneigem goes on to claim that May '68 had been a crucial moment in the long history of revolution because it embodies a total rejection of all alienations and therefore a unitary rejection of hierarchy: 'l'histoire individuelle de millions d'hommes, chaque jour à la recherche d'une vie authentique, rejoignant le mouvement historique du prolétariat en lutte contre l'ensemble des aliénations'.⁵⁶⁰ As such, Vaneigem argues that workers' councils have to be the bearers of the subjective demands that arise in the total transformation of everyday life.⁵⁶¹ This is to be the central goal of the council: to demand an immediate improvement in people's lives and a rejection of any partial transformations or organisation along economic lines.⁵⁶² The latter would be a sign of the bureaucratisation of the organisations and their turn into class enemies.⁵⁶³ Vaneigem states that each individual action of the councils must contain within it a totalising rejection of the whole. For example, Vaneigem argues that shops should become distribution centres for stocks in an effort to provide goods people need but also as a mean of immediately abolishing money and any lingering attachment to it.⁵⁶⁴ The point is to demonstrate in practice that humanity has no need of hierarchy for organising everyday life.

Vaneigem defines the specifics of the councils, arguing that each should quickly incorporate the rest of the community in order to become a self-organising

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Ibid., pp. 75-76.

⁵⁶³ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

group of around 10,000 people.⁵⁶⁵ The experience of liberation, Vaneigem argues, is itself the main tool that the revolutionary movement has to attract support.⁵⁶⁶ The councils should therefore organise an immediate improvement in the freedom and organisation of the construction of the everyday life of all.⁵⁶⁷ He concludes that the workers' councils can even be thought of as 'anti-législateurs' establishing new Rights of Man that would free humanity from the constraints placed on it by the history of economic development.⁵⁶⁸

With the move towards an elaboration of workers' councils, however, the Situationists had still not resolved the question of reorientation in response to the events of May '68. The last contribution Raoul Vaneigem was to make on this point was in a text comprising seven theses entitled 'Notes sur l'orientation de l'I.S.' completed in March 1970.⁵⁶⁹ Vaneigem argues that the SI needs to differentiate itself qualitatively from the rest of the revolutionary movement by reasserting its specificity as Situationist.⁵⁷⁰ Vaneigem notes that in the past the Situationist critique of art had led to the exclusion of artists from the group and, perhaps, artists had even stopped reading the SI; this was a beneficial change.⁵⁷¹ The SI had then begun the critique of ideology and in so doing attracted intellectuals and students.⁵⁷² However, these groups were also content to simply study a critique of themselves and not act.⁵⁷³ The SI, Vaneigem continues, have nothing in common with these groups and it should reject a

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 78

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 78-79.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 79. In his later work Vaneigem himself takes on this role of 'anti-législateur', see pages 238-240 of the current work.

⁵⁶⁹ Raoul Vaneigem, 'Notes sur l'orientation de l'I.S.', March 1970, *Débat d'orientation de l'ex-Internationale Situationniste 1969-1970* (Paris: Centre de Recherche sur la Question Sociale, 1974).

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., thesis 1.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., thesis 2.

⁵⁷² Ibid., thesis 3.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

readership that wants only to partially change society thereby ignoring the main thrust of Situationist theory.⁵⁷⁴

Vaneigem argues that it is now time for the SI to merge more closely with the proletariat as the abolition of the proletariat.⁵⁷⁵ The Situationists should not move towards a pure elaboration of councilism but rather a critique of the worker milieu itself.⁵⁷⁶ One important means of doing this is to prepare a Strasbourg-style coup in the factories.⁵⁷⁷ Such a position implies that the methods and tactics of the SI that were applied to the student movement and had met with such success there needed to be applied to the worker milieu where it would be most effective. Beyond the critique of ideology, Vaneigem suggests in this text that a critique that addressed the worker milieu would be linked more clearly with techniques of agitation.⁵⁷⁸

Despite the great deal of thought and discussion that went into the reorientation debate it was not clear how the SI was to move out of the impasse in which it had found itself. For his own part Guy Debord had become frustrated with what he saw as a lack of participation in the group on the part of most members, Vaneigem included. The thirteenth issue of *Internationale situationniste* was proving increasingly unlikely to appear and, Debord felt, members had become too content to rest on the laurels of May '68. Vaneigem had, however, been contributing to the reorientation debate and he was working at that time on a critical history of the Surrealist movement from a Situationist perspective that would later appear as *Histoire désinvolte du surréalisme*.⁵⁷⁹ Perceptions were quite different, however, in Paris. Debord and the French section sent out a communiqué to all the sections of the

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., thesis 5.

⁵⁷⁵ 'Notes sur l'orientation de l'I.S.', thesis 6.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., theses 1 and 7.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., thesis 7.

⁵⁷⁸ Arguably *De la grève sauvage*, op. cit., was Vaneigem's later attempt at a critique of this sort.

⁵⁷⁹ *Histoire désinvolte*, op. cit.

SI demanding an immediate self-critique on the grounds of non-participation. Raoul Vaneigem felt personally affronted by this move and saw it as a hierarchical manoeuvre on the part of Guy Debord.

On the 14th of November 1970, Raoul Vaneigem sent a letter of resignation to the French section of the Situationist International.⁵⁸⁰ Vaneigem states that the move by the French section was the most abstract move that could have been formulated in the group.⁵⁸¹ Vaneigem says that, where before it had been a passionate project, the Situationist International had simply turned into a ‘malaise d’être ensemble’.⁵⁸² Exactly why this had happened, Vaneigem claims, is for historians to establish.⁵⁸³ He restricts his own analysis to the failure of Situationist theory to penetrate the working class: ‘l’analyse aisé du peu de pénétration de la théorie situationniste en milieu ouvrier et du peu de pénétration ouvrière en milieu situationniste’.⁵⁸⁴ This was, of course, an indirect reference to his own contribution to the reorientation debate.

Rather than list his grievances with the SI, Vaneigem choses to offer a self-critique. He states that he had always believed other comrades to be as honest as himself but he is disillusioned both about himself and others.⁵⁸⁵ Moreover, this attitude led him to overlook the formation of ideological conditions within the SI that resulted from underhand tactical manoeuvring.⁵⁸⁶ Vaneigem says this is both his failure and that of the whole group. However, he continues vehemently to defend himself against anyone who accuses him of having an unrevealed mission of his own.⁵⁸⁷ The SI had not turned out to be what he wanted it to be despite his own

⁵⁸⁰ Raoul Vaneigem, letter of resignation from the Situationist International, op. cit.

⁵⁸¹ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 1170.

⁵⁸² Ibid.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ ‘je crache à la gueule de quiconque [...] me découvrirait des intentions secrètes’, *ibid.*

efforts. Moreover, he states that he would no longer speak to comrades who wished it. Vaneigem concludes by saying that if the French section continued to believe its own critique self-sufficient, without any proof, then he should be considered as having resigned and accepted the consequences of never seeing his Situationist comrades again.⁵⁸⁸

The resignation of Raoul Vaneigem marked a turning point in the history of the Situationist International. No large works of theory, no further issue of the SI's journal, nor a great deal of subversive actions were to occur after, at least not on the scale of what had come before. This is not to say that the Situationist International could not have continued without Vaneigem. Indeed, it did so until 1972. However, whoever was responsible for the rupture, it seems to have been quite a blow. It is not even entirely clear whether Debord originally wanted to push Vaneigem out or if he was just hoping to shake him into action. The SI itself excluded or received resignations from a number of other members, either in response to the resignation of Vaneigem or as a result of the previous position of the French section. From then on, Debord was his inveterate critic, though Vaneigem has been largely silent on the matter. Debord began to assess the history of the Situationist International, this implied that it was not to go on for much longer. In 1972 Guy Debord published *La Véritable scission dans l'Internationale*, effectively dissolving the SI.⁵⁸⁹ For Vaneigem, his resignation marked the end of almost a decade of participation in arguably the most radical revolutionary organisation of the twentieth century.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 1171.

⁵⁸⁹ *La Véritable scission*, op. cit.

Chapter 4. The Praxis of Pleasure: Capitalist Subjectivity and Emancipation in the Later Work of Raoul Vaneigem

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical exposition of the key developments in the later, or post-Situationist, work of Raoul Vaneigem. By far the majority of Vaneigem's oeuvre, theoretical and otherwise, has been written in the decades after his resignation from the Situationist International. In this time Vaneigem has published a number of book-length essays in the manner of *Traité*. These include *Le Livre des plaisirs* (1979), by far the most widely read of these later texts, *Adresse aux vivants* (1990) and *L'Ère des créateurs* (2010), among many others. Vaneigem has equally produced a number of books in other genres such as the utopian novel *Voyage à Oarystis* (2005) and *Déclaration des droits de l'être humain* (2001), which, as its title suggests, is a complete bill of rights that one might expect to enjoy in an emancipated society. Our analysis in this chapter will examine these works as embodiments of the direction that the critical theory of Raoul Vaneigem has moved towards in the years after his time in the Situationist International.

The context for this discussion is that Vaneigem has received a great deal of criticism from his peers for these later works. The most powerful example is, as ever, Guy Debord who critiqued *Le Livre des plaisirs* in a letter to Paolo Salvadori not long after the publication of the book.⁵⁹⁰ Debord describes the text as laughable.⁵⁹¹ He says that the critical position put forward in it amount to saying that revolution can be made simply by passing from pleasure to pleasure without having to consider anything else.⁵⁹² Debord states that Vaneigem rejects both strategy and the realities of

⁵⁹⁰ Guy Debord, letter to Paolo Salvadori, 20 November 1979.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

refusing contemporary society.⁵⁹³ As such, Debord concludes, Vaneigem has simply become a parish priest that promises paradise, without, by implication, providing the tools for its construction.⁵⁹⁴ A similar critical appraisal of *Le Livre des plaisirs* is found in the work of Barnard who states that the arguments of Vaneigem in the text require an ‘intellectual and spiritual leap of faith’.⁵⁹⁵ Barnard notes that a lot of the concepts and issues in the text seem to be rather ‘woolly’ and ‘poorly qualified’; his criticism focuses on three particular issues.⁵⁹⁶ First, Barnard says that Vaneigem gives individual agency but apparently excludes collective action.⁵⁹⁷ Secondly, he claims that it is unclear what Vaneigem means by autonomy and the process of its creation.⁵⁹⁸ Thirdly, Barnard is confused by the way Vaneigem discusses pleasure: ‘Would a revolution gratify and satiate desire in an orgiastic state of eternal pleasure?’⁵⁹⁹

These are both important criticisms of Vaneigem that deserve addressing. It is, of course, problematical that Vaneigem tends to avoid a systematic exposition of his conceptual framework. Moreover, the fact that Vaneigem focuses so much on the ‘subjective’ side of the problem of capitalism means he often avoids opportunities to provide insight into the more ‘objective’, or strategic, side of the structures of domination. Nonetheless, there seems to be clear confusion on the part of Debord and Barnard as to what Vaneigem is doing in *Le Livre des plaisirs*. Each of them thinks of ‘pleasure’ in terms of a monad, a single unit of gratification. If this was in fact what Vaneigem meant by pleasure then they would be correct to critique him. However, as I hope to show in this chapter, these are in fact projections of a bourgeois notion of

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Barnard, p. 127

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

pleasure onto Vaneigem that the author himself does not hold to. His conception of pleasure is very different. In order to understand just how different we have to describe the influence of Reichian theories of mental illness on his work.

Alexander Lowen: A Reichian Theory of Pleasure

The key to getting to grips with *Le Livre des plaisirs* are two books translated into French just a few years earlier, *Le Plaisir* (1976) and *La Bio-énergie* (1976) by Alexander Lowen.⁶⁰⁰ Although Vaneigem has never directly stated that Lowen is a major influence on his later work I believe that this is a reasonable supposition to make. Beyond the obvious similar titles of the works, as we will see, there are so many commonalities between the two authors, both on the level of language and theory, that there can be little doubt of a strong link. Moreover, throughout his time in the Situationist International, Raoul Vaneigem was an avid reader of Reich, even passing copies of his work around within the group.⁶⁰¹ It seems reasonable to assume then that Vaneigem would have been very interested in a book that echoed aspects of Reich that he had himself already drawn upon in *Traité*. A comparison of the two works, as will be shown, proves extremely useful in clearing up some of the confusion demonstrated by Barnard and, arguably, Debord.

Alexander Lowen began his career as a student and patient of Wilhelm Reich, one of the intellectual fathers of psychoanalysis, in the 1940s. Lowen was particularly fascinated by the relationship between the mind and the body in Reichian theory.⁶⁰² He notes that a theory of the *repression* of traumatic experience had already been

⁶⁰⁰ Alexander Lowen, trans. Bernard Cartier-Bresson, *Le Plaisir* [1970] (Paris: Sand, 1976); trans. Michelle Fructus, *La Bio-énergie* (Paris: Éditions Tchou, 1976).

⁶⁰¹ See Guy Debord, letter to Raoul Vaneigem, 18 October 1963.

⁶⁰² Lowen, *La Bio-énergie*, p. 10.

developed by psychoanalysis in the early part of the twentieth century.⁶⁰³ However, he asserts that Reich wanted to understand the psychological mechanism by which repression resulted in problems in later life.⁶⁰⁴ Lowen states that, to answer this question, Reich proposed that the repression of traumatic experience expressed itself as a *suppression* of sexual feeling in the years following the original trauma.⁶⁰⁵ The patient develops a ‘cuirasse’ or armour used to shut out dangerous feelings which threaten to come to her conscious awareness.⁶⁰⁶ Reich therefore made the relationship of the patient to her *feelings*, her awareness of her body, a determining factor in the psychology of his patients. On this basis Reich began to develop a language with which to talk about awareness of feeling as a ‘sexual energy’.⁶⁰⁷ Lowen asserts that this referred to both sexual feeling and feeling of the body more generally.⁶⁰⁸

Lowen broke with Reich in the early 1950s, as the latter began to move away from serious psychotherapy, and developed his own medical practice. He worked on the original idea established by Reich that neuroses result from the suppression of bodily feeling and developed his own distinct version of Reichian psychotherapeutic theory based on years of clinical work. In the 1970s and early 1980s Lowen went on to publish several works based on his theories, including as *Le Plaisir* (1976), *La Bio-énergie* (1976) and *Gagner à en mourir: Une civilisation narcissique* (1987), that knew a great deal of success in the United States and were quickly translated into French.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶⁰⁹ Alexander Lowen, *Gagner à en mourir: Une civilisation narcissique* [1984] (Paris: Hommes et groupes, 1987).

Lowen argues that a person is her body: ‘chacun est son corps’.⁶¹⁰ His ontology of human being is therefore rooted in an awareness of the corporeal reality of the self. The body, for Lowen, is in this sense a totalising concept. It is, at one and the same time, both who we are and the means by which we express who we are.⁶¹¹ It is through the mediation of the body alone that human beings experience and interact with the world: ‘Nul n’existe en dehors du corps vivant où se passe son existence et au moyen duquel il s’exprime et entre en relation avec le monde qui l’entoure’.⁶¹² The fact that Lowen states that nothing exists outside the body is not meant in a solipsistic sense but rather it is meant to stress the physicality and concreteness of being a human body. To be human, for Lowen, is not, as in Cartesian or Kantian thought, to be an empty, almost disembodied consciousness. It is to be a sensual, conscious and biological organism with concrete experiences, needs and desires. Moreover, the notion of the body that Lowen defines is both the conscious mind and the unconscious body as part of a single conception of the self. Lowen stresses this point clearly by claiming that even the most abstract considerations of a human being can ultimately be traced back to concrete sentiments and experiences.⁶¹³ A healthy consciousness in the eyes of Lowen is therefore one that is thoroughly rooted in an awareness of one’s body. Indeed, for Lowen, we can only know the world through the mediation of bodies: ‘Lorsque des événements du monde extérieur affectent le corps, on en fait l’expérience, mais ce qu’on ressent en réalité c’est leur effet sur le corps’.⁶¹⁴ Lowen

⁶¹⁰ Lowen, *La Bio-énergie*, p. 45.

⁶¹¹ ‘Si vous êtes votre corps, et que votre corps est vous, il exprime alors qui vous êtes. C’est votre manière d’être dans le monde’, *ibid.*

⁶¹² Lowen, *Le Plaisir*, p. 123.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

therefore argues that any objective sense of reality has to be grounded in a subjective sensual awareness and understanding of the corporeal self.⁶¹⁵

One of the essential aspects of any living organism, Lowen states, is that it seeks pleasure and flees pain.⁶¹⁶ The human organism, for Lowen, is no different in this respect from any other living thing and this axis of feeling determines our behaviour. Pleasure, however, has a very specific meaning in the work of Lowen. Lowen says that pleasure is a ‘manière d’être’ or mode of being that a person can feel in the most ordinary and everyday of activities.⁶¹⁷ Whatever the process may be, even forms of production or chores such as carpentry or house cleaning, a person is capable of feeling pleasure in them when they are freely undertaken and if she defines the pace of the activity according to her own natural inclination and personal capacity.⁶¹⁸ For Lowen, pleasure is therefore a fluctuation of positive sensations that a person feels when she identifies with the activity in which she is engaging.⁶¹⁹ As such, Lowen defines pleasure as a harmony between the human organism and its surroundings.⁶²⁰ That is to say, an environment, or society, conducive to this kind of spontaneity. Moreover, Lowen’s conception of pleasure is not a fixed state but rather very much defined as a process of creation that constantly transforms this environment, thereby developing always new and more intense pleasure.⁶²¹ Indeed, for Lowen, creation itself is driven by the human search for pleasure.⁶²² Creative acts are those that make life more pleasurable and that give it meaning.⁶²³ As such, there is a

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., p. 220.

⁶¹⁶ ‘Tout ce que fait un individu est déterminé par son désir de plaisir ou crainte de douleur’, Ibid., p. 122.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., p. 21

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

⁶²¹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶²² ‘Du début à la fin, tout le processus de création est motivé par l’attrait du plaisir’, *ibid.*

⁶²³ Ibid.

dialectical relationship between pleasure and creativity.⁶²⁴ The more pleasurable life is, the more one is creative; the more creative one is, the more life is pleasurable.⁶²⁵ For Lowen, the conscious creation of pleasure therefore forms the guide and prime motivator behind human life. The practice of pleasure is the essence of our humanity.

It should be noted that Lowen specifically contrasts his definition of pleasure with ‘fun’, which, he states, is an attempt to escape the reality of life rather than transform that reality for one’s enjoyment.⁶²⁶ Drugs, for example, only change one’s interior reality and leave the original situation that caused the need for escape intact.⁶²⁷ Pleasure, in contrast, demands a serious attitude to life and one’s concrete existence.⁶²⁸ Concretely, an extremely difficult task, such as learning a language or creating a work of theory, might prove ultimately far more meaningful and pleasurable than the instant gratification provided by a McDonald’s hamburger, watching television or the immense power immediately given to a person by a car. His conception of pleasure cannot therefore be conflated with the hedonism encouraged by consumer society. On the contrary, Lowen’s call for a practice of pleasure is an explicit rejection of the narcissistic ‘fun’ seeking of modern life.

Lowen argues that a person who feels pleasure is living well. Although Lowen provides no easy summary of what such a subject is like, it is possible to construct one from his scattered comments. She is in this sense a healthy human being.⁶²⁹ Such an individual, Lowen states, benefits from a range of positive human qualities that are reflected in the self. She is always in touch with her feelings.⁶³⁰ She breathes easily

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁶³⁰ ‘Ils sont à chaque instant en contact direct avec leurs sentiments’, *ibid.*, p. 78.

and more deeply.⁶³¹ She has great stores of creative energy.⁶³² She is open, friendly, generous and warm.⁶³³ She can express herself without repression in all circumstances. Life for such a person represents a creative adventure.⁶³⁴ The fact that she has confidence in her own feelings, a sense of rootedness, gives her the ability to assert herself against authority when necessary.⁶³⁵ She also has great critical capacities based in this confidence in her own practice of pleasure and her knowledge of what this requires.⁶³⁶ For this reason she is also more capable of saying no to herself when necessary.⁶³⁷ Lowen states that our ability to empathise with others depends on our ability to feel our own emotions.⁶³⁸ As such, this individual would be extremely empathetic. It is important to Lowen that such healthy subjects represent a unity, not only of the mind and the body, but of all the different stages in human development.⁶³⁹ A mature and healthy human individual will have integrated the experience of love and pleasure discovered in infancy, creativity and imagination in childhood, romance and adventure in adolescence, reality and responsibility in adulthood.⁶⁴⁰ She is therefore a fully integrated personality.⁶⁴¹ The spontaneity of her movements, her posture and even the timbre of her voice reflects this.⁶⁴² Although it might seem rather utopian, Lowen is not saying that any of it is possible, at least in our own particularly narcissistic society, without a lot of hard work on the part of the subject. Moreover, it is an ideal, healthy state that he, as a psychotherapist, is helping

⁶³¹ Ibid., p. 33.

⁶³² Ibid., p. 128

⁶³³ Ibid.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., p. 211

⁶³⁵ Ibid., p. 131.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., p. 145.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶³⁸ Alexander Lowen, *Narcissism: The Denial of the True Self* [1985] (New York: Touchstone, 2004), p. 49.

⁶³⁹ Lowen, *La Bio-énergie*, pp. 49.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 48-50.

⁶⁴¹ 'Chez un individu créateur, il n'y a pas de séparation, pas de barrière entre l'enfant et l'adulte, entre le cœur et l'esprit, entre le Moi et le corps', Lowen, *Le Plaisir*, p. 234.

⁶⁴² Ibid., p. 28.

his patients to work towards. It is after all one of the main goals of psychotherapy to help patients overcome pathological cycles of guilt and anxiety, to help them to have full sexual enjoyment and enduring, meaningful relationships. None of this is therefore any more unrealistic than the normal aims of psychotherapy.

The question remains then as to why people are not like this. Lowen argues that the source of the problem is mass culture. Contemporary society is based on an incessant struggle for success and power.⁶⁴³ There are hierarchies in almost every aspect of our lives, which means we are constantly being judged as successes or failures.⁶⁴⁴ People are encouraged to identify with this hierarchical system. They internalise its values and pursue recognition within it rather than base their behaviour on how they actually feel.⁶⁴⁵ This is translated into family life where people judge their own children's behaviour by these prevailing social standards.⁶⁴⁶ When children inevitably do not conform to these criteria they are humiliated by their parents.⁶⁴⁷ The social aim of this process is to turn each person into a submissive, obedient adult and a good worker.⁶⁴⁸

Lowen argues that this socialisation is extremely traumatic and leads to a schism between the mind and the body. Faced with humiliation, the child learns to suppress her feelings and to construct an external mask of acceptable behaviour in order to avoid further punishment.⁶⁴⁹ Eventually, however, the child becomes resigned to this division between the expressive façade and the inner reality.⁶⁵⁰ The schism begins to structure her personality.⁶⁵¹ Although the original trauma is

⁶⁴³ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 177.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 173.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 226.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

repressed, it continues to develop almost as a separate entity in the subconscious.⁶⁵² The self becomes conflated with the façade.⁶⁵³ At the same time, this artificial self becomes identified on a conscious level exclusively with the ‘esprit’ or mind.⁶⁵⁴ Through this mechanism the self is disassociated from the body. As such, the relationship between consciousness and reality of the body is sundered. This pseudo-disembodied self cannot, however, abolish the body. Feeling is still present.⁶⁵⁵ The self therefore constructs a series of rationalisations and justifications, as in Freudian theory, on the one hand, and, on the other, it constructs a ‘cuirasse’ a corporeal armour that represses feeling in the body, as in the theory of Reich. The body is thereby reduced to a kind of machine controlled by the mind rather than an integrated aspect of the self.⁶⁵⁶ The integrity of the personality is broken. The body becomes seen as something alien, even dangerous, that must be dominated.

Lowen argues that this mind-body schism creates what he calls a ‘peur de plaisir’ or fear of pleasure. The mind is unable to completely control, or abolish, the body, and it is afraid of those bodily processes that escape its control.⁶⁵⁷ If the subject were to feel pleasure fully, she would have to allow her body to express itself spontaneously and this would challenge the rigidity of the body.⁶⁵⁸ The subject, however, is afraid of the negative feelings that would result from breaking this rigidity.⁶⁵⁹ Lowen argues that the subject is therefore caught because in order to feel pleasure one has to be able to face this pain.⁶⁶⁰ It is the pain of the original repressed trauma that introduced the rigidity in the first place. As such, Lowen argues, the

⁶⁵² Ibid.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 227.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 226.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 225.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

subject would have to be honest with herself about the artificial self and the rationalisations she has constructed to defend it.⁶⁶¹ Lowen suggests that this would require rejecting the guilt that she has accumulated as a result of identifying her self with the system of hierarchical images presented to her by our society. Most people, however, continue to suppress these feelings because they cannot face them. The strong emotions she has suppressed do not go away, they continue in the subconscious, but they find a negative outlet in desires for that which will support her façade of self. Moreover, she projects her own repressed parts of herself, her fears, onto others.⁶⁶² Lowen argues that children in particular are subject to this kind of hostility from adults because they do not conform to the image parents expect of them (which is, in fact, the adult's ideal image of themselves).⁶⁶³

This fear of pleasure, Lowen asserts, drives a desire for power on the part of the subject. Lowen defines power as the opposite of pleasure.⁶⁶⁴ Much like 'fun', Lowen argues that the struggle for power is the result of a need to compensate the self for interior distress.⁶⁶⁵ It is a form of compensation, in fact, for a lack of pleasure in one's life.⁶⁶⁶ It gives a person a means of self-expression that is safely contained within the hierarchy with which she identifies.⁶⁶⁷ All of her acts are made in order to reinforce this perfect identification of her self with the image presented to society.⁶⁶⁸ This lust for power is based on the illusion that power and success within the social hierarchy actually contributes to real pleasure in anyway.⁶⁶⁹ This is, of course, an idea encouraged by advertising and other aspects of contemporary society. Lowen argues

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶⁶² Ibid., p. 161.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., p. 162.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 74-75.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

that those subjects who are defined by this search for power, over pleasure, are just an empty representation of the role that they have adopted in society.⁶⁷⁰ They have no real identity or personality specific to themselves. As such, Lowen argues that they also have no real power because that which is given to them is based on the fact that they have stopped being a real person.⁶⁷¹ Lowen therefore states that while these people may find success in terms of the social role they have taken on, they are actually failures as human beings.⁶⁷²

Lowen contends that those people who are defined by their fear of pleasure are in some sense literally more dead than an integrated personality. He defines death in this sense as a cessation of breath and a loss of feeling.⁶⁷³ It is a situation of stasis or lack of movement.⁶⁷⁴ The 'dead' person breathes less or less easily.⁶⁷⁵ She has a diminished capacity for pleasure.⁶⁷⁶ This includes difficulties experiencing full, sexual pleasure.⁶⁷⁷ She is afraid of her emotions.⁶⁷⁸ Her body seems alien to her, an encumbrance.⁶⁷⁹ Indeed, she fears her own body.⁶⁸⁰ She is overly conscious of her self and she lacks spontaneity in her movements.⁶⁸¹ Because she is unable to feel her own emotions, she lacks the ability to empathise.⁶⁸² She projects her inner distress on to others and is aggressive.⁶⁸³ Her body is rigid because she has suppressed her feelings.⁶⁸⁴ Moreover, she is controlled by images of success presented to her by

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 54, 57.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 106.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid., p. 48.

⁶⁸³ Ibid., p. 161.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

society.⁶⁸⁵ She is in this sense not a real person.⁶⁸⁶ She is terrified of failure, success is absolute for her.⁶⁸⁷ Her body is like a machine that is used to accomplish the task of supporting her artificial self.⁶⁸⁸ For this reason she is cut off from reality.⁶⁸⁹ She cannot say no to authority figures and the social pressure to conform.⁶⁹⁰ Lowen argues that her will to pleasure is therefore broken.⁶⁹¹ She has repressed the child in her.⁶⁹² She is wracked by feelings of guilt and shame.⁶⁹³ Because she lacks the necessary spontaneity for pleasure, her life is empty and boring.⁶⁹⁴ For Lowen, this is the tragedy of the modern, narcissistic individual.

Lowen is not for his own part a radical by any stretch of the imagination. He is, for example, very hostile to struggles between workers and employers. In many ways he romanticises the capitalist society of his childhood in the early twentieth century. Further, the liberation he imagines for the narcissistic subject of modern society from ‘la peur de plaisir’ is couched almost exclusively within the context of psychotherapy and self-help. However, his theories about the causes behind inhumanity and the problems faced by capitalist subjects in contemporary society are quite powerful. As we shall now see, these aspects are incorporated by Vaneigem into his earlier critical theory in order to provide the new developments we see in his later work.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 114-115.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 132.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., p. 136.

⁶⁹² Ibid., p. 142.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., p. 171.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 220.

Lowen's Theory of Pleasure in the Work of Vaneigem

In Chapter 1 of the current work it was argued that Vaneigem posits praxis as the essence of human being. Vaneigem argues that mankind engages in a constant process of world and self creation through a conscious practice rooted in a *volonté de vivre*, an inherent drive to realise the concrete needs and desires that arise out of everyday lived experience. When this process is engaged in freely it allows the possibility of a passionate existence that forms the basis for an authentic human life. All of this still holds true in the later work of Raoul Vaneigem. However, in these post-Situationist texts, Vaneigem merges his own take on the ontology of human being with the arguments and language of Lowen that have been outlined above. As has already been noted, Vaneigem makes no direct statement to this effect anywhere in his work, so this assertion is one that has to be deduced from the way in which he develops and employs his critical theory in these later texts. Nonetheless, it will hopefully become clear that the similarities are evident and that a knowledge of the theories of Lowen help to better qualify the language and contextualise the arguments that many readers of Vaneigem's later works have found confusing.

Like Lowen, Vaneigem states that a human being *is* her body.⁶⁹⁵ For Vaneigem the body is in this sense just as totalising a concept as it is for Lowen. He states clearly that the body is the locus of all human experience.⁶⁹⁶ In this later work *la vie quotidienne* therefore becomes 'la vie quotidienne du corps'.⁶⁹⁷ The body has thus become the site of the *vécu* or lived experience described in *Traité*. Further, in

⁶⁹⁵ '[L'économie] a imposé l'idée que l'homme a un corps alors qu'il est un corps', *L'Ère des créateurs*, p. 79.

⁶⁹⁶ 'ce corps [...] qui est le lieu de toutes les sensations, de toutes les connaissances, de toutes les délectations et de toutes les peines; ce centre lumineux des réalités tangibles', *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 97.

⁶⁹⁷ *Le livre des plaisirs*, p. 194.

line with Lowen, the notion of the body that Vaneigem employs in his work is equally meant as a term that imagines the mind and the body as two aspects of a unified biological conception of self. Throughout his later writing, for example, Vaneigem asserts that authentic consciousness is sensual consciousness or consciousness rooted in an awareness of the body.⁶⁹⁸ Vaneigem even goes so far as to say that it is this sensual intelligence that will abolish hierarchical society.⁶⁹⁹ As we shall see below, Vaneigem therefore rejects *la pensée séparée* as abstract thought that is separated from this tangible reality. These later developments tell us that, in his later work, Vaneigem moves away from a more abstract conception of subjectivity to root it in the definition of the body that Lowen develops. Praxis now takes place as a natural function of the human organism rooted in the organic processes of the body. In a sense the notion of *la volonté de vivre* already implied such a position but this merger with a Lowenian conception of the body allows an even more concrete picture of the subject in conscious mediation with the world and itself.

In accordance with the theories of Lowen, Raoul Vaneigem argues that the life of the human body is essentially defined by a conscious practice of pleasure. It is important to keep in mind that the definition of pleasure that Vaneigem employs in his later work is evidently taken straight from Lowen. For example, like Lowen, Vaneigem argues that pleasure is something one can feel in the most ordinary of activities.⁷⁰⁰ He stresses that pleasure is not a fixed moment of gratification but a process that results in a proliferation of new and more intense pleasures.⁷⁰¹ Further, in

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 43; *L'Ère des créateurs*, p. 46.

⁶⁹⁹ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 111.

⁷⁰⁰ 'Plaisirs de la paresse, de la ténacité, de la rencontre, de la solitude, de la musique, de la création, plaisir de parler, de se taire, de rire, de chier, de rêver, d'enlacer, de pleurer, de pisser, de crier, de caresser, de mouiller, d'éjaculer, de bondir, de rouler, de goûter, de humer, de toucher, de se joindre et de s'éloigner', ibid., p. 186.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., p. 52.

line with Lowen, Vaneigem defines creativity as that which makes life pleasurable.⁷⁰² Creativity in this sense cannot take place in the context of external constraints but must define its own conditions for action.⁷⁰³ Moreover, as for Lowen, Vaneigem sees this relationship between pleasure and creativity as a dialectical one. Creation realises pleasure but it is pleasure that stimulates creation: ‘seule la recherche du plaisir nourrit et stimule la création du soi et du monde’.⁷⁰⁴ In the work of Vaneigem, as in the work of Lowen, it is this practice of pleasure that is the essence of life: ‘Le plaisir crée la vie’.⁷⁰⁵ The adoption of these arguments by Vaneigem allows him to refer to the entire process of a free creative praxis simply as *le vivant*, a term that will be explored in more detail below, and that which engages in this practice as *la matière vivante* or living matter.⁷⁰⁶ A ‘human’ society, for Vaneigem, would therefore be one founded upon this practice of pleasure and a ‘living’ person would be someone who engages in this practice. As we shall see, Vaneigem believes that commodity society embodies the opposite of this logic.

It is crucial to note that the definition of pleasure that Vaneigem employs in his work is neither orgiastic gratification nor consumerist hedonism. Vaneigem specifically critiques Reich for reducing pleasure—which he refers to here as ‘la sexualité globale’, by which he means creativity in general—to genital satisfaction.⁷⁰⁷ Although it is an aspect of pleasure, the reduction of pleasure to the orgasm, cut off from a more totalising notion of human realisation, has simply turned the genitals into a social

⁷⁰² Vaneigem states that the true nature of creativity is ‘la jouissance de soi s’affirmant dans la jouissance du monde’, *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 232.

⁷⁰³ ‘La création ne tolère ni espace ni temps déterminés, elle les détermine à volonté’, *L’Ère des créateurs*, p. 83.

⁷⁰⁴ *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 205.

⁷⁰⁵ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 185.

⁷⁰⁶ *L’Ère des créateurs*, p. 93, 95.

⁷⁰⁷ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 26-27, 51.

fragment and, most crucially, a source of profit.⁷⁰⁸ Indeed, throughout his work Vaneigem consistently contrasts his notion of pleasure with the ‘pleasures’ offered by consumer society. In his critical theory the consumption of commodities is a type of *pseudo-pleasure*, which he calls *les plaisirs de survie*, that occupies the same place in his writing as the idea of ‘fun’ does in the work of Lowen.⁷⁰⁹ Vaneigem argues that capitalist society only *appears* to emancipate pleasure from hierarchical social constraints. He asserts that, because it was unable to abolish them, commodity society simply turned pleasures into a source of profit.⁷¹⁰ This has made pleasure subject to an even more abstract force of human domination than in pre-capitalist societies in the sense that there are now economic forces and ideologies driving people to performative acts of ‘pleasure’. Where in early modes of social reproduction pleasure was often banned outright, in contemporary commodity society this has been replaced by forced ‘pleasure’.⁷¹¹ In a later work Vaneigem gives a good concrete example by stating that where once a young woman would feel ashamed for not being a virgin, she is now made to feel ashamed for being one.⁷¹² Significantly, this example appears to be lifted straight from Lowen.⁷¹³ Vaneigem argues that in modern consumer society people perform acts of pleasure not freely but in order to conform to the performative roles required by the commodity form and earn the recognition of their equally alienated peers.⁷¹⁴ Vaneigem likens this process to castration.⁷¹⁵ This is because the ‘pleasures’ of commodity society denote the impossibility to engage in the ‘sexualité globale’, the practice of pleasure, as defined by Lowen and himself. Vaneigem asserts

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 27.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., p.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷¹¹ Ibid., p. 37.

⁷¹² *Le Chevalier*, p. 256.

⁷¹³ Lowen, *Plaisir*, p. 178.

⁷¹⁴ ‘Dites-moi en quoi boire, baiser, causer pour prouver qu'on est un homme, une femme, un chef, diffère de travailler pour un patron’, *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 181.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

that the commodification of pleasure has thereby turned pleasure into its opposite: pain.⁷¹⁶ Vaneigem therefore argues that ‘pleasure’, as capitalist society offers it, is a kind of work. Indeed, he terms this process the ‘prolétarisation’ of pleasure.⁷¹⁷ It should be clear from this analysis that *Le Livre des plaisirs*, and the direction of the later work in its entirety, is explicitly driven by a critique of the appropriation of pleasure by capital. It is therefore difficult to understand how Barnard and, arguably, Debord could have believed the argument of the book to be a call for simple orgiastic gratification or support for consumerist hedonism, as these very stances are the object of Vaneigem’s critique.

The appropriation of pleasure by capital is an aspect of the later work of Raoul Vaneigem that is tied to his earlier arguments about alienated praxis first put forward in ‘Banalités de base’ and *Traité*. Chapter 1 of the current work described how first order mediation, *praxis*, becomes second order mediation, *praxis aliénée*, when the conscious dimension of creative practice is separated from the subject by social constraints. Praxis becomes a fetishistic process where the subject’s own actions become alien to them as they transform into the simple agents of abstract social forms. This suppresses the *volonté de vivre*, which re-emerges in its repressed form as a *volonté de puissance*, a desire to dominate oneself and others that leads to inhuman actions. As one might now expect, Vaneigem merges these arguments in his later work with Lowen’s theories on the origins of insanity and how it manifests itself in his patients. Vaneigem goes further than Lowen, however, in developing these ideas into a much more all-encompassing social theory of alienation and how it is expressed in the subject.

⁷¹⁶ ‘la dialectique de la marchandise exige que le plaisir devienne douleur’, *ibid.*, p. 135.

⁷¹⁷ ‘La libération apparente des plaisirs exprime en fait leur prolétarisation réelle’, *ibid.*, p. 22.

Throughout the later work of Raoul Vaneigem there is the sense that capitalist society, the economy itself, is founded upon a very real appropriation of the human body, of living matter, as described above. He argues that the economy functions through the seizure of our very desires, which it then turns against us to its own ends.⁷¹⁸ It is an ‘abstraction monstrueuse’ that takes hold of our gestures, our muscles and behaviour to the point that our own selves, in a concrete and corporeal sense, are perversely at odds with us.⁷¹⁹ Vaneigem describes this in highly Rabelaisian style as an economisation of every aspect of the body, from the genitals and the eyes to the stomach and intestines, which makes the body no longer a human body but one structured, down to its very reflexes, around the needs of commodity society.⁷²⁰ The economy therefore destroys the very thing that produces it: human beings.⁷²¹ Vaneigem even describes the economy as a kind of cancer.⁷²² For Vaneigem the abstract necessities of the economy therefore essentially act to dehumanise us by extracting what is ‘living’ in the Lowenian sense, that is to say, our spontaneity based on a practice of pleasure. It empties us of, what Vaneigem calls, our ‘substance humaine’.⁷²³

Vaneigem argues that the concrete effect of this process of economisation of the body is to introduce a schism between the mind and the body. Vaneigem asserts that this schism is an internalisation of the division of labour between intellectual and manual labour.⁷²⁴ In this schema the head takes on the role of the master and the body

⁷¹⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁷²⁰ ‘Poussant de plus en plus loin ses implants dans un corps de plus en plus morcelé, elle invente une économie gastro-intestinale, génitale, oculaire, cervicale, une économie des organes, des fonctions, des réflexes qui, modelée sur le monde dominant, impose ses normes de rendement, de profit, d’épargne, de dépense, de volonté de puissance, d’échange’, *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷²¹ Ibid., p. 11, 60.

⁷²² ‘Dépouillée de ses mythes et dénoncée par la misère de son spectacle, l’économie n’est plus que la maladie du vouloir-vivre, le cancer du vivant’, *ibid.*

⁷²³ Ibid., p. 93.

⁷²⁴ Ibid., p. 92.

that of the slave.⁷²⁵ Vaneigem suggests that this division could equally be understood as reflecting the way that abstract social forms dominate the concrete world.⁷²⁶ The head is the part of the body through which abstraction is made concrete in the personality as it bends the body to its fetishistic needs: ‘La tête devient ainsi le lieu où le corps se rend étranger à lui-même’.⁷²⁷ Vaneigem therefore argues that commodity society literally makes our bodies into something that seems alien to us. The mind or ‘esprit’, which in French, it is important to remember for our following chapter on religion, also means spirit, is this consciousness of the body separated from the whole and identified only with the head. Vaneigem describes the mind in this sense as a trap that suppresses any unity within the body by punishing its own desires.⁷²⁸ He argues that the self has retreated, as it were, into the head but, in typically strong literary imagery, it reigns only over the ‘appearance’ of a body, like a shadow of power over a tower of skulls.⁷²⁹ In contrast to the notion of a sensual intelligence then, the mind embodies what Vaneigem refers to as *la pensée séparée*, as described in Chapter 1 of the current work.⁷³⁰ Vaneigem sees this separated thought of the mind dominating the body as characteristic of intellectualism.⁷³¹ However, Vaneigem also critiques anti-intellectualism as the intellectualism of favouring the schismed body over the mind that was characteristic of much of the old workers’ movement. Like Lowen, in opposition to both of these forms of intellectualism, Vaneigem argues that thought should reflect a sensual intelligence rooted in self-awareness of the body and its

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ ‘Le système cervical s’est modelé sur le système marchand. Il traduit en mécanismes de pouvoir l’organisation abstraite qui est celle de l’économie, il catalyse la réaction d’échange où la vie se transforme en travail’, *ibid.*, pp. 93. The suggestion here is obviously that there is some kind of break or suppression of information about the body to the brain through the spine.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁷²⁸ *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 73.

⁷²⁹ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 12.

⁷³⁰ *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 73.

⁷³¹ *Le Livre des plaisirs.*, p. 14, 91, 92, 96.

concrete needs and desires.⁷³² For Vaneigem, commodity society is not therefore something that is simply external to the subject, it has become written into our very personalities: ‘La lutte des classes est inséparablement dans la rue et en moi’.⁷³³

Vaneigem, following Lowen, argues that the mind-body schism that defines capitalist subjects results in a fear of pleasure: ‘la seule peur qui nous ait jamais hantés apparaît en dernière analyse comme une peur fondamentale de jouir’.⁷³⁴ The terminology is slightly different here in that Vaneigem refers more commonly in his work to a ‘peur de jouir’, whereas Lowen terms it a ‘peur de plaisir’. However, the meaning is essentially the same. It may be that Vaneigem chose to refer to *jouissance* because it has a more varied meaning in French. It can refer to pleasure, enjoyment, sexual delight, the use of something and in verb form it also refers to sexual orgasm. One of the more famous pieces of May ’68 graffiti was, of course, ‘Jouissez sans entraves’. Nonetheless, all of these different aspects are also implied in Lowen’s definition of the fear of pleasure. It is this Lowenian fear of pleasure that Vaneigem uses to describe the form that subjectivity takes in capitalist society. (It should be noted in what follows that Vaneigem does not argue that this fear of pleasure is limited to bourgeois subjects alone, it encompasses the experience of all subjects in capitalist society and, to a greater or lesser extent, defines their personalities).

Like Lowen, Vaneigem argues that childhood is key to understanding the origins of the fear of pleasure in adults. He claims that, before their socialisation, children embody a unity of the self, a praxis of pleasure, that is lost in adults.⁷³⁵ Children therefore symbolise a repressed aspect of the self that poses a threat to the economy and its adult agents. In this sense the child becomes an object of hatred for

⁷³² Ibid., p. 107.

⁷³³ Ibid., p. 35.

⁷³⁴ Ibid., p. 130.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

capitalist subjects who feel the need to shape it into the same subject form as they themselves.⁷³⁶ Vaneigem argues that in capitalist society childrearing and education therefore amounts to teaching children to be resigned to alienation and to fear pleasure.⁷³⁷ Vaneigem explicitly defines education in this sense as making the child internalise the schism between the mind and the body.⁷³⁸ As with Lowen, Vaneigem says this is done through punishment and humiliation by which the child is taught to *adapt* itself and, in so doing, to submit to all forms of alienation.⁷³⁹ Vaneigem states that the child learns that it must dominate its body and its desires.⁷⁴⁰ Like Lowen, Vaneigem does not suggest that we should simply let a child do what it wants in every circumstance, but giving children choice and as much autonomy as possible would aid their development into full human beings.⁷⁴¹ Instead of this, people learn that they must make themselves appear to conform to certain roles and images in order to avoid punishment.⁷⁴² Concretely, for Vaneigem, this means that children are taught to reject a practice of pleasure, as defined by Lowen, in order to submit to work and to resign themselves to pseudo-self-realisation through consumerism. They learn effectively that pleasure is limited to what can be paid for through labour.

Vaneigem, in line with Lowen and Reich, proposes that the capitalist subject constructs a muscular *cuirasse* or *carapace*, literally body armour or shell respectively, that it uses to suppress repressed desires and sensual feelings at odds with the role it has adopted.⁷⁴³ Exactly like Lowen, Vaneigem associates the development of this armouring with a suppression of breathe in order to suppress

⁷³⁶ 'Ils ont haï l'enfant en se haïssant, ils l'ont battu pour son bien, ils l'ont éduqué dans l'impuissance, où ils se trouvaient, d'aimer la vie', *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 20.

⁷³⁷ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 116.

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁷⁴¹ *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 48.

⁷⁴² *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 170.

⁷⁴³ *Le Livre des plaisirs*: 'carapace', p. 94, 102, 135, 142-143, 148, 187; 'cuirasse', p., 76, 77, 161, 173, 201, 204.

feeling.⁷⁴⁴ Moreover, Vaneigem states, with Lowen, that the whole body of the subject becomes more rigid and lifeless.⁷⁴⁵ In this way the capitalist subject rejects its essential spontaneity and inclination towards pleasure that characterised its childhood. Vaneigem therefore describes the adult of capitalist society in the strongest terms as an ‘enfant avorté’.⁷⁴⁶ At the same time, Vaneigem states that the adult condemns itself to permanent guilt because the body can never be abolished nor conform perfectly to all of the differing roles with which it is expected to identify.⁷⁴⁷ He says this in one of the most powerful passages of *Le Livre des plaisirs* where he states that guilt is essentially based on the complete lack of respect that exchange has for human life.⁷⁴⁸ Vaneigem tells us here that from the abstract perspective of economic society a person can never renounce themselves enough. One is always guilty of something no matter what one does. Indeed, Vaneigem is essentially arguing, as in all of his later work, that the absolute crime in the eyes of commodity society is the fact of being a human being at all, at least as far as he defines humanity. As in the work of Lowen, the overall impression of this later work by Vaneigem is to suggest that people fear pleasure in the sense that they cannot face up to this unpleasant fact. They have suppressed it just as they have repressed all spontaneous desire after a lifetime of humiliation and being made to feel guilty for any thought, emotion or desire that enters into a unified praxis of pleasure. The escape into the mind was in some sense originally a refuge from this trauma but in the long run it only serves to make the self identify with the roles offered by society rather than the reality of the concrete, living

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 173.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 127.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

⁷⁴⁷ ‘La culpabilité tient au non-respect fondamental de l’échange: tu ne renonces jamais assez à toi. C’est pourquoi, partout et toujours, tu es coupable. Coupable de ne pas travailler, de travailler, d’être riche, d’être pauvre, de jouir, de ne pas jouir, de ne pas faire jouir, de réussir, de rater, de vivre et de mourir’, *ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

self. Debord may critique Vaneigem for ignoring the realities of refusal in *Le Livre des plaisirs*, but arguably Vaneigem is attempting to address the refusal of reality, that is to say, the insanity of fearing the reality of one's own concrete needs and desires, that defines the everyday existence of capitalist subjects.

In the work of Vaneigem the fear of pleasure may suppress desires and emotions but they do not go away. Instead they find expression in what he terms *la volonté de puissance*. Vaneigem is explicit in his work that *la volonté de puissance* is the product of a repressed *volonté de vivre*.⁷⁴⁹ Vaneigem argues that every negative aspect of our experience—from stress and anguish to shame and guilt—results, on a subjective level, from this mechanism of repression.⁷⁵⁰ Vaneigem even goes so far as to say that every illness imaginable is a sign of a *volonté de vivre* that is in difficulty.⁷⁵¹ More importantly, however, Vaneigem contends that this process results from a fear of life that ultimately drives the aggressiveness of capitalist subjects. For example, he compares the behaviour of the modern capitalist subject to an animal held in captivity.⁷⁵² As such, he argues that cruelty and aggression feed on the frustrations that arise in the body due to the fear of pleasure that stops the original impulse finding expression.⁷⁵³ Following Lowen, Vaneigem argues that in such cases people look for power over others and success within society in order to compensate and control repressed desires.⁷⁵⁴ For Vaneigem, inhumanity is therefore the alienated presence of a human desire for pleasure and self-realisation that has been suppressed and, within capitalist society, found negative channels for expression in what can only

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid., p. 43.

⁷⁵² Ibid., pp. 69-70.

⁷⁵³ 'Ce qui rend cruel, c'est la transformation de la volonté de vivre en volonté de puissance. Le rapport de force s'alimente à l'incessante frustration des plaisirs inversés, au lieu que l'art de jouir se nourrit du plaisir pris sans contrepartie. C'est pourquoi la cruauté est devenue la mesquinerie ordinaire de l'homme sans qualité', *ibid.*, p. 193.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 191.

be called barbarism. Indeed, Vaneigem argues that contemporary capitalist society is just as barbaric, if not more so, than the barbarism of the past.⁷⁵⁵ Commodity society, Vaneigem says, is different only in that its barbarism is more bureaucratic, more equally shared out and it is something to which we ourselves consent. One might say that, for Vaneigem, the fear of pleasure means that this barbaric cruelty is not only something that we inflict on others, it is also something we aim at ourselves. Just as praxis is the free creation of the self and the world, so *praxis aliénée* is the fetishistic destruction of the self and the world.

The other side of the language of life that Vaneigem employs in his work is the language of death. Death is a major theme of the later work of Raoul Vaneigem. He describes the economy as a process of turning living matter into dead matter.⁷⁵⁶ Vaneigem does literally mean death as in the more obvious examples of war and suicide. However, he also means the kind of death that Lowen describes in his work. Lowen's notion of death, as we saw above, is a kind of diminished or complete lack of a capacity for pleasure in a subject. The body is rigid and mechanical. In thought and action the subject lacks spontaneity and seeks recognition of its façade through situating itself in relation to social power and success. Such a person is submissive and also imposes its own 'death' in this sense, or even literally, on others due to a lack of empathy. In the work of Vaneigem 'death', *la mort*, means all of these things and more. For example, Vaneigem sees work as the opposite of creativity; if pleasure creates life, then for Vaneigem, work creates death.⁷⁵⁷ It separates human being from the praxis of pleasure that is the foundation of all life. Further, just as Vaneigem refers

⁷⁵⁵ 'Notre barbarie n'est pas moindre que celle des hordes mongoles, elle est seulement plus bureaucratisée, mieux répartie démocratiquement, plus proche de la mort consentie comme un laborieux défolement', *ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷⁵⁶ 'notre propre substance vivante se transforme en matière morte, au prix—comble d'ironie—des plus grands efforts', *ibid.*, p. 245.

⁷⁵⁷ 'Le travail sépare l'homme de la jouissance de soi. Telle est la séparation d'où procèdent toutes les autres', *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 94

in his later work to *la vie quotidienne* as *la vie quotidienne du corps*, he also speaks of *la mort quotidienne*. What he means by this is that capitalist society diminishes our humanity, it destroys our spontaneity, our love of life, or others, our search for pleasure and our ability to create it. It turns us into dead things in a process of abstraction. For this reason, he often calls capitalist society *la civilisation mortifère*, *la civilisation de mort* or *la civilisation moribonde* in his later work.⁷⁵⁸ The capitalist subject he describes as a corpse that has replaced a living human being.⁷⁵⁹ This is why Vaneigem refers to those in whom capitalist subjectivity is particularly strong as *les morts*, the dead.⁷⁶⁰

The language and therefore the arguments of Vaneigem in his later work are often difficult to follow. Vaneigem provides no clear, systematic exposition of his ideas that would allow one to easily get to grips with what he is saying. The definitions are, however, evidently present in his work, though it requires more than a superficial reading to pick up on them. It also becomes much easier to make sense of exactly what Vaneigem says once we read his work alongside that of Lowen. In some respects this is a weakness in that it is extremely difficult for readers not very familiar with his work to make sense of his arguments. In other respects, however, it is also something of a strength in that, although one feels there is some lucidity lacking that one can find, for example, in the work of Debord, there is also a visceral and pleasantly meandering quality to his work that reminds us that for him radical poetry and theory intermingle. There is a certain power behind the notion that the struggle against capitalism can simply be described as a battle between life and death. But

⁷⁵⁸ *Le Livre des plaisirs*. p. 7, 17, 23.

⁷⁵⁹ 'L'obligation, pour assurer un travail de survie, de renoncer à ses désirs nourrit quotidiennement un cadavre qui n'a guère de peine à prendre prématurément la place du vivant. L'acte de décès est le plus souvent un constat d'usure qui a force d'assassinat légal', *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 225.

⁷⁶⁰ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 13; *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 157.

such language is meaningless without a knowledge of the rich arguments and associations these terms have for Vaneigem. No doubt this is the reason why many contemporary readers unfamiliar with these arguments have been put off by or simply misunderstood his later work.

Patriarchy and Pollution as a *peur de jouir*

The emancipation of women is not a subject that the Situationist International dealt with in any great depth or detail. This is not to say that it was not an explicit concern of the Situationists. For example, in the early 1960s, Asger Jorn wrote a small work on gender, *La Genèse naturelle*, which was edited in French by Guy Debord (though by this point Jörn was a clandestine member of the group).⁷⁶¹ The twelfth issue of *Internationale situationniste* states that the importance of the participation of women during May '68 is proof of the profoundly revolutionary character of these events.⁷⁶² Debord and Sanguinetti also refer directly to the significance of the struggle against alienation by women and gays, albeit somewhat belatedly, in 1972.⁷⁶³ Moreover, it should be stressed that the Situationists' critique of alienation was always totalising and implicitly involved the liberation of women even if this is not always directly stated. There were also several prominent female figures in the group, in particular Michèle Bernstein, who, in a recent talk in London, vigorously defended the Situationists against accusations of sexism.⁷⁶⁴ Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the SI never placed the specific role of women in capitalist society and the particular challenges this poses for radical change at the forefront of their discussion. Vaneigem

⁷⁶¹ *Le Genèse naturelle*, op. cit.

⁷⁶² *Internationale situationniste*, 12 (September 1969), p. 4.

⁷⁶³ Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 1094.

⁷⁶⁴ 'The Revenge of the Situationists', talk for the launch of *The Spectacle of Disintegration* by McKenzie Wark, South Bank Centre, 26 May 2013.

does not directly deal with the problem at all in *Traité*. When he does speak of patriarchy in the book, he is clearly referring to the subservient role of children more than that of women in the family structure.⁷⁶⁵ In his later work, however, the question of female emancipation is an important theme. Indeed, Vaneigem argues that the failure of the workers' movement to make the abolition of patriarchy an integral part of its revolutionary project explains a large part of its failure.⁷⁶⁶

It is important to consider this transformation in the context of the rise of Second Wave Feminism in the 1970s. It could be argued that this new current of feminism was directly influenced by the Situationist concern with politicising the everyday. The ex-Situationist Timothy Clark, for example, has said as much at a recent appearance.⁷⁶⁷ Certainly, the Second Wave Feminists were reacting to both the successes and failures of May '68 as a movement of emancipation. They sought to raise awareness about the social character of gender norms and the specific challenges that women face in contemporary society. These included, of course, the rights of women to control their own bodies and to have access to an existence beyond the domestic sphere. As we shall see, Vaneigem is critical of certain expressions of feminism that define 'emancipation' as having equal access to capitalist categories but he is also clearly heavily impacted in the 1970s by this radical reappraisal of the role of women in capitalist society as part of a project of universal liberation. Moreover, from the 1990s onwards he is evidently influenced by the American philosopher John Zerzan, who examines hunter-gatherer societies, including the place of women within

⁷⁶⁵ *Traité*, pp. 276-277.

⁷⁶⁶ 'Nous avons sous-estimé à quel point le mouvement ouvrier, porteur du projet de libération universelle s'était amputé de sa radicalité en négligeant l'émancipation de la femme; à quel point il s'est ainsi condamné à régresser dans un passé patriarcal et avait résigné sa puissance au profit d'une bourgeoisie parasitaire', Raoul Vaneigem, 'Que le cri du peuple soit celui de la vie' in *Hôtel Oasis, Pour Louise Michel* (Paris: La Passe du Vent, 2005), no page.

⁷⁶⁷ This was in response to a question at a talk given by Donald-Nicholson Smith that Timothy Clark was leading. London Review of Books Bookshop, London, 26 March 2013.

them.⁷⁶⁸ Vaneigem also seems to have developed ties with Alain Mamou-Mani, a French thinker who argues that contemporary society is defined by the dominance of ‘masculine’ qualities.⁷⁶⁹

Vaneigem places the origins of patriarchy in the agricultural revolution when mankind established a society based on production rather than hunter-gathering. Vaneigem states that the role of women in this society was essentially reduced to the production of workers, both in the sense of giving birth to them and as childrearsers.⁷⁷⁰ Given what has been stated above, it is easy to see that for Vaneigem such a reduction of a human being’s creativity to a single role is a kind of death. It is no longer a practice of pleasure, of which the production of new human beings is one part, that defines the lives of women but rather their creativity is now constricted by a particular social role to which they are expected to conform. In a certain sense this death is literal. Vaneigem notes, for example, that with the advent of agrarian society and patriarchy the life expectancy of a woman dropped dramatically, from 40 to 25 years of age, due to premature deaths caused by the frequency of pregnancies.⁷⁷¹ In this sense Vaneigem suggests that the unified creativity of women is both fragmented to a single aspect and it also escapes their own control as it serves abstract productivist needs that are placed above their own concrete ones.

Vaneigem develops these arguments by proposing that pregnancy and childbirth symbolise the natural unity of human creativity.⁷⁷² It is perhaps for this reason that Vaneigem states women embody the *vivant* in a way that ‘men’ do not.⁷⁷³ It is clear that Vaneigem is not making an essentialist biological statement here. The

⁷⁶⁸ See *L'Ère des créateurs*, pp. 31-32.

⁷⁶⁹ See Raoul Vaneigem, ‘Postface’ in Alain Mamou-Mani, *Au-delà du profit, Comment réconcilier Woodstock et Wall Street* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

⁷⁷⁰ *L'Ère des créateurs*, p. 32.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷⁷² *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 35.

⁷⁷³ Ibid., p. 66.

notion of a creativity, a praxis of pleasure, that escapes the productivist logic of these societies poses a threat. Men are in this sense forced to become men. They have to repress their own femininity, the woman in them.⁷⁷⁴ Although he is not entirely clear as to the mechanism, Vaneigem suggests that it is through projection that women became identified with that which was socially dangerous and disdainful because their association with a form of creativity that does not enter directly into the economy retains the hint of a life beyond it. On the one hand, this has meant that women were traditionally forgiven aspects of expression that were gradually denied to men, such as crying.⁷⁷⁵ On the other hand, it has meant that, not only were women reduced to the domestic sphere, but the feminine has historically been associated with evil.⁷⁷⁶ For Vaneigem the feminine therefore represents that which is repressed by societies based on the exploitation of human beings.⁷⁷⁷ It is for this reason that one gets the impression in his later work that the feminine embodies a kind of subversion: ‘la femme est au centre du monde à créer’.⁷⁷⁸ For Vaneigem a radical change of this kind requires men and women to embody a unity of qualities that are currently identified only with the masculine or feminine.⁷⁷⁹ Creativity, Vaneigem argues, has to be liberated from these fragmentations of being that have only ever served economic, not human, needs.

In terms of the concrete implications of this theory, Vaneigem aims his critique at the primary role offered to women by capitalist society: the ‘mother’. Vaneigem defines the mother as a person who approaches the birth and raising of

⁷⁷⁴ *L'Ère des créateurs*, p. 67, 105.

⁷⁷⁵ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 99.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143-144.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁸ *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 65.

⁷⁷⁹ ‘Ce qui n’appartient pas à la lumière du jour—c’est-à-dire à la raison économique et au temps de travail—, son comportement économe le refoule dans la nuit du sexe, dans les profondeurs du moi où les monstres du dédoublement achèvent de dissocier en éléments séparés l’enfant, l’homme et la femme, trois réalités qui ne sont en fait que trois moments de l’individu accédant à l’unité de la jouissance’, *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 144.

children in the manner required by commodity society.⁷⁸⁰ As we have seen above, this means a capitalist subject who introduces the mind-body schism into the child in order to create an obeisant worker. Although this role is, of course, mainly associated with women, Vaneigem is once again clear that the mother is not limited to women in the biological sense, rather it is a role that everyone in capitalist society adopts at some point or another.⁷⁸¹ Moreover, it is clear that this role is something that capitalist subjects engage in with each other even past the point of childhood as the attempt of any person at a renaissance, in the sense of the metaphorical rebirth of a human being trying to accede to a praxis of pleasure, is socially suppressed by those around them. Capitalist subjectivity is not something that is only formed in childhood but it keeps being reformed throughout our lives. Vaneigem is asking us to be aware of how we are all at some point implicated in the role of mother in this repressive sense both with regards to ourselves and others. The mother, Vaneigem argues, kills the lover in the woman (again not necessarily in the biological sense), the person who can create pleasure.⁷⁸²

Vaneigem is critical of forms of feminism that treat the emancipation of women as a goal that can be achieved through winning equal rights.⁷⁸³ The realm of work, the public sphere, is not a realm of freedom, rather it is that from which mankind must be freed. For Vaneigem, the search for equality in the workplace is a form of pseudo-emancipation as it serves to simply further integrate women more directly into the capitalist mode of reproduction. The ultimate result of these capitalist forms of feminism, Vaneigem argues, is simply to win women the right to be bosses,

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 142.

⁷⁸¹ 'chacun de nous, qu'il soit homme ou femme, est déterminé à se comporter tôt ou tard en mère, en mère d'enfants réels ou imaginaires, mère de chienneries compensatoires, mère de rachat, mère de régiments et de partis', *ibid.*, p. 153.

⁷⁸² Ibid., p. 142.

⁷⁸³ Ibid., 155-156.

cops, political militants and soldiers.⁷⁸⁴ In other words, equality of oppression. This is not the liberation of women, for Vaneigem, but rather the further development of commodity society. The real choice is not one between gender equality and a lack of it but between two completely different civilisations: one that bars women access to a unified praxis of pleasure and another that makes such liberating praxis the basis of all social life.

Another subject that was rather under-examined by the Situationist International was the issue of ecology. The great exception to this rule was *La Planète malade* by Guy Debord that was meant to appear in the final issue of *Internationale situationniste* but was only published posthumously.⁷⁸⁵ Much more recently, another ex-Situationist, René Riesel was imprisoned in France for engaging in the destruction of genetically modified crops.⁷⁸⁶ As with the issue of female emancipation, the problem of the effect of human exploitation on the natural world is one that has developed into a major theme of the later work of Raoul Vaneigem. It is clear that the Situationists, and Vaneigem in particular, had some influence on at least one of the major thinkers of the ecological movement, Murray Bookchin. Bookchin makes explicit reference to Vaneigem in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, one of his first important works on the subject.⁷⁸⁷ Indeed, Vaneigem and Bookchin apparently met in person on the former's ill-fated trip to New York in 1967.⁷⁸⁸ Although he could not be termed a 'green anarchist', in his approach to this subject Vaneigem is clearly interested in the

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁵ Debord, *Œuvres*, pp. 1063-1069.

⁷⁸⁶ See René Riesel, *Aveux complets des véritables mobiles du crime commis au CIRAD le 5 juin 1999 suivis de divers documents relatifs au procès de Montpellier* (Paris: Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 2001).

⁷⁸⁷ Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986), p. 61.

⁷⁸⁸ Janet Biehler, *Ecology or catastrophe, The Life of Murray Bookchin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 113.

negative effects of industrial technology and issues such as the size of human communities that Bookchin raises in his work. As with gender, however, Vaneigem also develops his own interpretation of the ecological question based on the Lowenian theories described above.

Vaneigem argues that the agricultural revolution completely transformed the relationship of human kind with the natural world. In hunter-gatherer societies, he argues, human beings lived in a symbiotic relationship with nature.⁷⁸⁹ Vaneigem likens this relationship to that between a child and its mother in the womb.⁷⁹⁰ Just as women or femininity embody something that is exploited and repressed in productivist societies, so too nature represents our own nature.⁷⁹¹ For Vaneigem, the exploitation of nature and human nature are therefore predicated upon one another. Just like the human body, or femininity, nature poses a threat to the productivist form of social organisation because it has its own essence that escapes the logic of exploitation. Vaneigem argues that this is why it has historically been feared and dominated.⁷⁹² The heavens rule over corrupt earthly nature, just as the head over the body, the man over the woman. Vaneigem compares the exploitation of nature to patriarchy. The origins of both are in agrarian society and in many respects they embody a similar projection of a repressed desire and suppression of a repressed aspect of a unified self and praxis of pleasure. For this reason, Vaneigem states that the Agricultural Revolution, and the history of humanity since then, represents a break in our evolution as human beings.⁷⁹³

⁷⁸⁹ *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 55.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷⁹² 'En société patriarcale, la nature partage le sort de la femme et de la classe dominée. Elle est admirable de loin. Brise-t-elle dans la fureur de ses éléments déchaînés le joug qui la contraint? C'est une force hostile, meurtrière, monstrueuse, un péril pour la civilisation', *ibid.*, p. 81.

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

For Vaneigem, the human relationship with nature before agrarian society was founded upon abundance, whereas contemporary society is based on scarcity.⁷⁹⁴ The ability of nature to provide us with shelter and nourishment should represent a kind of gift to human beings that does not need to pass through exchange. In this Vaneigem is clearly heavily influenced by the work of the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins on hunter-gatherer societies. It was Sahlins who first suggested this notion of a society that is based on abundance.⁷⁹⁵ Hunter-gatherers have a completely different relationship to the production of the necessities of life because their environment provides them with everything they need. They produce only what is necessary for their immediate existence and do not have any market pressures to produce anymore than that. There is therefore a kind of equilibrium between the groups and the natural world. They only 'work' when necessary and have little concept of ownership. Western society, in contrast, imposes scarcity through ownership of the means of subsistence. Vaneigem argues that mankind needs to return to this kind of relationship with nature that does not pass through exchange and, therefore, labour.

In the work of Vaneigem history has been the story of the domination and exploitation of human nature and the natural world towards the development of the economy. In a certain sense then we can see the argument that Vaneigem develops about nature as once again entering into this notion of a process of death. Environmental disaster is a kind of reflection in nature of what human beings are doing to human nature, to the human body. Just as a person needs to be dead to themselves in order to demand the death of another, they must also be dead to themselves in order to enact the death of the natural world. Fundamentally, the

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 58, 64.

⁷⁹⁵ See Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1974).

ecological crisis is the product of a society based on productivity and scarcity that is not driven by human or natural needs but by the entire history and logic of the economy. Vaneigem sees hope, however, in the final crisis that capitalist civilisation is currently facing. What is perhaps most surprising about the later work of Vaneigem, given that he does not seem to evoke the possibility in his earlier work, is that he believes in a final economic crisis of capitalism. He argues that the tendency of the rate of profit to fall has led to a massive devaluation of capital as technological innovation is making profits unrealisable.⁷⁹⁶ Right now capitalism is in its last gasp. In its final stages, Vaneigem argues, capitalism will invest the last of its resources in a green capitalism that will mark its death throws.⁷⁹⁷ These final moments will provide green technologies that will help us to re-establish a more human relationship with nature.⁷⁹⁸ In other words, the collapse of capitalism will create the possibility of creating a new symbiotic relationship with nature based on its inherent abundance. This reconciliation with nature will also be a reconciliation with our own natures.⁷⁹⁹ As I will note in the conclusion, it is a pity that Vaneigem does not really develop this notion of an economic collapse further as this is one of the key aspects of contemporary radical theory as represented by the critique of value.

Le Vivant: The Emancipation of Pleasure

Although Vaneigem holds to the theory of a final crisis of the economic categories of capitalism, this does not mean that he thinks a liberated society is necessarily the inevitable result. On the contrary, Vaneigem argues that the collapse of capitalist

⁷⁹⁶ Raoul Vaneigem, 'Observations sur le *Manifeste*' in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifeste du Parti Communiste* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 1994), p. 68.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁸ *L'Ère des créateurs*, pp. 18-19.

⁷⁹⁹ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 233; *L'Ère des créateurs*, p. 85.

civilisation also presents mankind with the terrifying possibility of its total annihilation.⁸⁰⁰ Presumably the environmental disaster and simple barbarism prepared by the logic of commodity society could bring about an end to all human life in the most literal sense. That Vaneigem suggests this is often lost to most readers because he is usually quite positive in his rhetoric about the chance that human beings can respond to these conditions. However, it raises the question of what the purpose of his discussion of ‘death’ or a fear of life is in the context of the coming crisis. In the exposition above it is clear that Vaneigem is above all concerned in his later work with constantly stating what it means to be a human being. As bizarre as it might sound, commodity society has created a world of individuals who are cut off from this most basic information about themselves. They identify not with their own concrete needs and desires but with the abstract categories of capitalist society: work, competition, money etc. If a crisis is in fact coming, how will these people respond to the collapse of this society? It would appear that Vaneigem is trying to create, or at least speak to, a consciousness that is capable of responding to the collapse of capitalism because it understands that it will require a completely new civilisation founded on a new notion of human being. If the logic of contemporary subjectivity, ‘les morts’, wins out then the results could be a decent into complete barbarism and even the end of mankind. It is therefore paramount, for Vaneigem, to have a theory of liberated subjectivity—its character, means and goals—in order to set the groundwork for a new world when the old one comes to an end.

The term that Vaneigem gives to his notion of a liberated and liberating subjectivity is *le vivant*: the living or living being. In French the word *vivant* denotes a qualitative sense of creative energy, movement, brilliance, pleasure and passion. It

⁸⁰⁰ Vaneigem, ‘Observations sur le *Manifeste*’, p. 69.

also evokes the suggestion of ‘good living’, as in the *bon vivant*, a person who enjoys the pleasures of life. Vaneigem employs the term *vivant* both as a noun and an adjective in his work. As was noted above, in the form of a noun it primarily refers to the essential substance of human being in the sense that Vaneigem defines it: the inherent drive towards the creation of pleasure through world and self-creation, i.e. the body and its *volonté de vivre*. In adjective form it refers to something that has this quality of being based in the body’s drive to realise its concrete needs and desires. The *vivant* is something that always exists as a biological function of human being, but it is suppressed in societies dominated by fetishistic social forms. In the context of capitalist society it therefore exists as that which has not yet been completely alienated from the subject, such as love, a subject to which Vaneigem devoted a whole book, *De l’Amour* (2010).⁸⁰¹ It is also that which must be encouraged and created in order to encompass the whole self and the whole of society in a radical change of civilisation. The *vivant* in this sense is the emancipation and realisation of authentic human being.

This latter conception of the *vivant* that Vaneigem puts across in his work has a number of corollary influences in literature. First, there is Henri Lefebvre’s Marxian *homme total*: the subject that has abolished alienation and who is directly in control of her mediation with the world. The second is Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*: the subject that realises her will in opposition to those social norms that stand in her way. The third is, of course, Lowen’s idea of the creative individual that engages in a practice of pleasure. All of these different influences mix together in the idea of the *vivant* that Vaneigem develops in tandem with his own conception of radical subjectivity that was defined in Chapter 1 of the current work: the subject that understands her own

⁸⁰¹ Raoul Vaneigem, *De l’amour* (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 2010).

individual realisation can only happen through a collective struggle for individual realisation. The *vivant* is therefore that substance of human life which is alien to the logic of capitalist society (though it may be caught in it) because it is based in an incessant practice of pleasure through world and self creation; which, in turn, is founded on the concrete needs and desires of the human body as a totality and thereby stands against all abstract economic necessity. It is therefore the opposite of the ‘death’ that, Vaneigem argues, defines capitalist subjectivity. The *vivant* breathes, it is spontaneous, of great quality, creative, empathetic, confident, open, warm and all of the other attributes that Lowen assigns to the creative individual. It is to this that Vaneigem is speaking in the title of *Adresse aux vivants sur la mort qui les gouverne et l’opportunité de s’en défaire*.⁸⁰²

The most important basis for encouraging the creation of the *vivant*, Vaneigem argues, is to place the foundation of human social life in the ‘gratuit’ or ‘gratuité’. The *gratuit* in French is a term which, like *vivant*, has a rich cluster of associations. Primarily it refers to something being ‘free’ in the sense of an object or service for which one does not have to pay. In this definition it essentially refers to a gift that escapes the usual dominance of exchange. It can also refer, however, to the notion of an ‘acte gratuit’, a disinterested action or one motivated by empathy for which one expects no reward. Conversely, the ‘acte gratuit’, can also refer to the notion of an action that is done outside any reasoning, a wanton act, which sets a person apart from social norms. This has a particular history in French literature, especially the work of Gide, who in *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914) describes a man who commits the completely unmotivated murder of a stranger on a train.⁸⁰³ Other examples would be

⁸⁰² *Adresse aux vivants*, op. cit.

⁸⁰³ For a brief overview of the ‘acte gratuit’, see Laurence Porter, ‘Decadence and the *fin-de-siècle* novel’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel: From 1800 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 101-102.

the murder of an anonymous Arab man in Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* (1942), which results in the character facing a murder trial in which society seems more enraged by his refusal to even pretend to be apologetic than the murder itself. Another instance, that Vaneigem himself evokes in his earlier work, is the claim by André Breton that 'L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, sur la foule'.⁸⁰⁴ Vaneigem, of course, argues against any such action. He says that these desires in modern subjects reveal the need for the immediate abolition of capitalist society because they are the product of the systematic destruction of human life that it creates.⁸⁰⁵ However, the notion that the *gratuit* is an action that unveils and overcomes social constraints is an important one in his conception of it.

For Vaneigem, the notion of *gratuité* serves to denote a practice that does not enter into exchange and the reproduction of capitalist social categories.⁸⁰⁶ In capitalist society everything is expected to serve some economic purpose. This is why our socialisation is so brutal. Human beings do not naturally enter into economic relationships. They do so only under duress. In contrast, *gratuité* is that which serves no economic purpose whatsoever. It is just that which arises concretely from a genuine practice of pleasure: 'J'aspire seulement à la gratuité, à cette inutilité de mes jouissances sans contrepartie'.⁸⁰⁷ In this sense *gratuité* could be thought of as an act or mode of being that, in the current context, struggles against or simply exists in opposition to the economy. At the same time, *gratuité* is also the possible basis for an entire society. Vaneigem asserts that any genuinely human society after capitalism would have to be grounded in concrete human needs and desires, not obedience to

⁸⁰⁴ Cited in *Histoire désinvolte*, p. 63.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 64-65.

⁸⁰⁶ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 10.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 73.

fetishistic social forms. As we have seen, for this to happen people have to recognise that the only good reason for any action is that it arises from a genuine human impulse for making life more pleasurable in the complex sense defined above. By encouraging and pursuing *gratuité*, Vaneigem argues, we stand against the essence of capitalist society.⁸⁰⁸ Presumably this is because we denaturalise ourselves from the notion that we must compare ourselves to the standards of a society based in the economy. Vaneigem suggests that to do this is to create a *nouvelle innocence*, that is to say, the perspective of *gratuité* breaks us away from the guilt and shame that comes from measuring ourselves against the social roles with which we are supposed to identify.⁸⁰⁹ Above all, however, *gratuité* implies a collective, or social, practice of breaking away from the notion that everything must enter into exchange and economic production in some way.⁸¹⁰

In his later work, Vaneigem provides a number of concrete proposals for exactly how this could be done and what the realisation of such *gratuité* might look like. In *Modestes propositions aux grévistes* (2004), for example, Vaneigem suggests that, instead of destroying infrastructure or bringing it to a halt, during strikes workers could take it over in order to run it.⁸¹¹ Transport workers, for example, could provide transport but refuse payment from the public, hospital workers could overlook payments from patients and culture could be given out freely.⁸¹² In this way the provision of services becomes a form of *gratuité* that denaturalises people to the necessity of exchange. The strike, even when limited to a single sector, thereby becomes a moment of rejecting capitalist categories on a symbolic level rather than

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 133.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

⁸¹¹ Raoul Vaneigem, *Modestes propositions aux grévistes pour en finir avec ceux qui nous empêchent de vivre en escroquant le bien public* (Paris: Verticales, 2004).

⁸¹² Ibid., 146.

reinforcing them. Strikes are just one part, however, of a larger movement towards self-management that, as was discussed in the previous chapter of the current work, has been a core aspect of the theory of Vaneigem since his time in the Situationist International. Indeed, his first major publication after leaving the SI was *De la grève sauvage à l'autogestion généralisée* (1974).⁸¹³ Here Vaneigem argues that through the seizure of infrastructure and organising its use through direct democracy, as happened in Spain in the 1930s, workers establish the basis for a non-hierarchical social relationship based on the organisation of an individual and social practice of pleasure. Moreover, although he moves away from what he sees as the intellectually driven violence of his time in the SI, Vaneigem does not shirk from the fact that the creation of such a society will inevitably involve some degree of violence as reactionary forces stop people acceding to a world where they no longer have to sacrifice their lives to the economy.⁸¹⁴

Vaneigem is clear, however, that the take over of infrastructure must have a conscious aim in mind that escapes capitalist categories. Otherwise, workers could simply end up reproducing economic relationships. Vaneigem mentions, for example, the workers of the LIP factory in the early 1970s who took over their workplace after a dispute with management but continued to work within an economic framework. The most detailed description of what these aims should be that Vaneigem gives is to be found in his *Déclaration des droits de l'être humain* (2001), which could be thought of as a text to help orient workers' councils and, eventually, fully autonomous, self-managed communities.⁸¹⁵ Although Vaneigem frames this orientation in terms of 'rights' it is clear that he means something quite different from

⁸¹³ *De la grève sauvage*, op. cit.

⁸¹⁴ Ibid., p. 50, 127, 129, 131-133, 178, 207.

⁸¹⁵ Raoul Vaneigem, *Déclaration des droits de l'être humain, De la souveraineté de la vie comme dépassement des droits de l'homme* (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 2001).

the formal rights of modern societies. Vaneigem argues in his preamble, for example, that the *Rights of Man* are nothing more than freedoms that have been given by men to the economy.⁸¹⁶ They are based on an abstract notion of human being, an economic actor rather than the creative individual in charge of its own destiny.⁸¹⁷ Vaneigem contrasts this with his idea of ‘droits de l’être humain’, or rights of the human being, which are the liberties and modes of being that a person should expect to enjoy once the *vivant* is established as the primary motor of life. As this implies, these are not rights that can be granted by a state, rather they are ones that must be conquered by a social movement and a society that has abolished the conditions for their violation.⁸¹⁸

The *Déclaration* contains 58 articles of right each with subsections and commentary in the manner of a piece of legislation. The rights cover a diverse range of subjects that effectively encompass almost every major aspect of a society. Some of them are quite abstract. For example, Vaneigem states that every person has the right to become a human being and to be treated as one (article 1). He also states that everyone has the right to the ‘poésie d’existence’ (article 57) and to authenticity (article 10 a 3). However, although these are quite abstract assertions, our exposition of the theory of Vaneigem in the current work should show that these are not ‘woolly’ concepts but grounded in a Marxian theory of praxis and a concrete notion of what is necessary to human fulfilment. If Vaneigem is not overly prescriptive this is rather to his credit as it leaves it open to each individual to ascertain what this means for them, while establishing the general prevalence of these ‘rights’ as a social goal. Autonomy is, indeed, a major focus of the ‘rights’, and specifically the freedom to express one’s true self in the Lowenian sense. Vaneigem states, for example, that every human being has the right to express or silence their emotions, their desires and their

⁸¹⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁸¹⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

thoughts (article 47). It is significant that this is precisely what Lowen argues modern subjects are not allowed to do as part of their social life. Vaneigem also makes a number of concrete proposals about the more practical aspects of everyday life. He states, for example, that everyone has the right to use their time as they please (article 6) and that they also have the right to health (article 8 c). In a more psychogeographic vein, Vaneigem also asserts that every human being has the right to the use of a home that reflects their desires (article 8 a). In many respects this is an incredibly ambitious work. It attempts to do nothing less than create a complete transformation of how humanity conceives of itself and what the goals of human society should be. In many respects, it is clear that Vaneigem is aiming at something as world changing as the social contract laid down by Rousseau. For Vaneigem, the concepts developed in *Déclaration* and throughout the later work could form the basis for a reorientation of social relationships around a new world where ‘le plaisir aille de soi’.⁸¹⁹

In his 2005 novel *Voyage à Oarystis* (illustrated by the artist Giampiero Caiti) Vaneigem gives us an incredibly detailed picture of what a society based on the principles laid out in this chapter would look like.⁸²⁰ The book follows an unnamed narrator and his lover Euryménée who live in contemporary Venice. The narrator speaks of a utopian city, a ‘Venise plus parfaite’, named Oarystis that was founded many years ago by people simply described as ‘amoureux de la vraie vie’.⁸²¹ The two protagonists write to the people of Oarystis in order to ask to visit as guests. After being accepted, they travel to the city where they engage in a veritable *dérive* through what is perhaps the most fully realised image of unitary urbanism and psychogeography that exists in Situationist writing. More importantly, Oarystis is a

⁸¹⁹ *Le Livre des plaisirs*, p. 17.

⁸²⁰ *Voyage à Oarystis*, op. cit.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

community, a social relationship, founded on the principles of the *vivant* that Vaneigem has developed in his later work.

The city, or country, of Oarystis comprises around 7000 inhabitants.⁸²² This is near the size of Lessines, the hometown of Raoul Vaneigem in its heyday. Further, it establishes a community that is small enough to have personal, direct relationships, and with smaller impact on the local environment but also large enough to retain a certain diversity and dynamism. The city itself is fantastic, though realisable, embodying the most imaginative reaches of unitary urbanism as first imagined by Gilles Ivan. A mountain lake sits above the city providing it with rivers, canals and mechanical energy as well as visual pleasure. The planning and architecture of the town draws on Venice, Amsterdam, Renaissance Italy and all manner of different abodes from tree houses to more recognisable homes. Indeed, the city contains a diversity of environments: a jungle, a forest, and a 'Dôme de climats', which recreates every season of the year so that people can enjoy whatever atmosphere suits the moment. In every wall, alley, nook and cranny of Oarystis strange devices, statues, murals, paintings, bits of poetry and interesting spaces are to be found, all in a state of constant flux and change, leading the main protagonist to comment, 'Les Oaristyens ont vraiment horreur du vide. *Horror vacuis*'.⁸²³ The values of the city are further reflected in the naming of every area and street after the likes of Montaigne, Blake, Kafka, Ducasse, Kleist ...

The richness of the space is established by an everyday life based on a praxis of pleasure that is realised, individually, through the free disposition of time and, collectively, as an extension of the latter through direct democracy. Work does not exist in Oarystis, rather each individual spends their time in whatever activity for

⁸²² Ibid., p. 32.

⁸²³ Ibid., p. 71.

which they have an affinity in that moment of their lives. As such, there is what could be called a loose ‘division of labour’ but it is based purely on inclination. What ‘civic’ tasks there are to perform are dealt out according to inclination also, and where this is not possible, rare apparently, as fairly as can be. The result is an exuberance of quality, creativity, diversity and pleasure in the everyday activities and products of the Oarystians. Indeed, such is the lack of division between art, labour and life that Vaneigem’s fictional Venetian visitors are slightly embarrassed by the fascination, passion and enjoyment Oarystians seem to discover in every activity with which they task themselves.

The city appears to be run on the principles of direct democracy, with a General Assembly of directly recallable delegates with specific mandates. Matters that involve the whole city are voted on in the Place des Assemblées, also called Place Charles Fourier and Place de la Communauté, split in two by the city’s largest canal. The voting system is similar to Ancient Athens as citizens walk to either side of the square to mark their vote or stand on the bridge if they are undecided. The city, it is remarked, therefore retains the original meaning of ‘politics’, limited to the practical management of the city alone. One rather Swiftian example of this political system in action is started by Euryménée.⁸²⁴ The narrator tells us that the public toilets of Oarystis are organised so that citizens defecate onto statues of famous dictators such as Stalin, Napoleon and Mao. Euryménée is put out by this, believing that toilets should instead create a feeling of calm and comfort. The debate is taken up with much interest by the whole of the city and, after a vote in the affirmative, is acted upon. In this way democracy functions as the direct expression of the needs and desires of the

⁸²⁴ Ibid., pp. 47-49.

population, the people taking part in the vote are deciding on how they want to spend their own creative energies.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the book, however, is the Oarystians themselves. Vaneigem gives us an image of these individuals as human beings in harmony with themselves and their community. Everything about the people of Oarystis is *vivant*, from what they wear, to what they say, to how they act and what they create. Without the intrusion of abstract social categories or hierarchical constraints, the people of Oarystis are able to objectify themselves in nature according only to what they concretely need and desire. Time, relationships, expressions, every aspect of life takes on a very different meaning. The kindness and sensitivity of the Oarystians is a simple extension of the healthy relationship they have with themselves. In other words, what Vaneigem offers in *Voyage à Oarystis* is a vision of a unified subjectivity rooted in the body and its practice of pleasure. Just as there is no state, no money, no police and no priests in Oarystis, so too there is no governing mind or 'esprit' in the individual subjects to suppress feeling and dominate the body. The fear of pleasure is completely alien to them. It is this vision of an entirely new and human civilisation founded on *la volonté de vivre* that is the essence of the later work of Raoul Vaneigem.

The exposition of the theories of Raoul Vaneigem in this chapter has hopefully clarified the most essential developments in his later work. Once they are placed in the context of the Reichian theory of pleasure that Vaneigem takes from Lowen, the language and certain of the arguments can be more easily qualified. Though it is no doubt true that he often assumes rather too much familiarity with his terminology from his readers, there can be little doubt also that a lot of the hostility exhibited

towards Vaneigem's later works is often rooted in a superficial reading of his texts. With this confusion resolved, however, a rich and compelling oeuvre is opened up to us that presents a vision of human life totally at odds with prevailing attitudes and everyday norms. It should be remembered that these are additions and improvements to the earlier theory, not repudiations. In this sense, although the language and argument has been added to since our exposition in Chapter 1, Vaneigem has certainly lost none of his radical fervour in these later works.

Chapter 5. *Ni dieu, ni maître*: The Religious Criticism of Raoul Vaneigem

En vérité, la bourgeoisie ne nous a pas débarrassés de Dieu, elle a seulement climatisé son cadavre.⁸²⁵

The aim of the current chapter is to provide an exposition of the religious criticism of Raoul Vaneigem. Despite the fact that the topic features throughout the work of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, in the extant literature there has to date been no extensive examination of the critique of religion in the work of any Situationist. This is a particularly major gap in our understanding of the later writing of Raoul Vaneigem because he has made the critique of religion the subject of several large literary projects. Between 1986 and 2000, Raoul Vaneigem produced no less than five books on religion: *Le Mouvement du Libre-Esprit* (1986), *Les Controverses du Christianisme* (1992), *La Résistance au Christianisme* (1993), *Les Hérésies* (1994) and *De l'inhumanité de la religion* (2000).⁸²⁶ Indeed, Raoul Vaneigem has developed something of a reputation as a medievalist thanks to the extensive and original research several of these works demanded. *La Résistance au Christianisme*, for example, is nothing less than a complete historical account of the development of Christianity; and *Les Controverses* provides an A to Z of Christian thought from Vaneigem's perspective. The current chapter will demonstrate that the definition and critique Vaneigem develops of religion in his later work is rooted in the arguments about the praxis of pleasure and its alienation that were described in the previous chapter. It will be argued that in the work of Raoul Vaneigem religion forms an important perspective from which to understand the origins of contemporary social

⁸²⁵ *Traité*, p. 191.

⁸²⁶ Vaneigem has also prefaced some editions related to the subject, see Raoul Vaneigem, 'Préface' in *L'Art de ne croire en rien* suivi de *Livre des trois imposteurs* (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 2002); 'Préface' in Georges Eekhoud, *Les Libertins d'Anvers* (Paris: Éditions Aden, 2009).

life. It will be shown that Vaneigem argues capitalist society does not escape religious attitudes but continues them in new abstract social forms and hierarchical separations. The chapter will also explore how Raoul Vaneigem has consistently looked back to certain heretical movements of the Middle Ages, to mysticism and to alchemy, both as sites of historical interest and as a metaphorical language for alienation and its abolition.

A Definition of Religion

The definition of religion that Raoul Vaneigem uses in his critique is based on the idea of human praxis that we have explored in Chapters 1 and 4 of the current work. In Chapter 1 it was shown that Vaneigem sees the creatively conscious dimension of human practice as the essential aspect of human being. It was demonstrated that for Vaneigem alienation occurs as a second order mediation in which human beings objectify themselves through abstract social categories. In Chapter 4 we saw how Vaneigem develops this notion of praxis in his later work by situating it in the body as the locus, or primary motor, of pleasure. In this context alienation is conceived as a mediated abstraction but one thought of as internalised in the subject through a schism between consciousness and the body. For Vaneigem hierarchical social relations function as a suppression of the body through this schism from the mind. It will be argued here that Vaneigem sees religion as the original social form that this rupture took when economic social relationships were first established.

Vaneigem dates the birth of religion in its institutional forms to the beginnings of agrarian society, in around 7000 BC, a moment which he also associates with the

birth of the economy and the state.⁸²⁷ Vaneigem contrasts pre-agrarian, hunter-gatherer societies with post-agrarian ones. He argues that earlier societies enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with nature and the self.⁸²⁸ Agricultural society, however, inaugurated an exploitative hierarchical relationship with nature.⁸²⁹ As we saw in the previous chapter, this economic relationship in the work of Raoul Vaneigem divides humanity into intellectual and manual labourers. He suggests that this process excludes the practice of thought from those who perform manual labour and, in the same dialectical movement, excludes manual labour from those who direct that labour through practicing thought. That is to say, society became divided into those who organised production and those who produced. Vaneigem therefore implies that a double alienation takes places: thought is alienated from a group of humanity who previously interacted directly with nature, while this direct interaction is alienated from another group who have come to control this interaction. What Vaneigem is presenting here is the origins of a division of praxis into thought and practice. It is a separation that he sees mirrored in the division of spirit and body in religion. Vaneigem argues that these divisions form the foundation of the hierarchical principle: the separation of humanity into order-givers and order-takers. For Vaneigem such separation is an attack not only on the unity of human society but also on the very essence of each individual human being and his or her own nature: ‘Parce que les dirigeants ne sont rien d’autre que les produits de la pensée séparée—des travailleurs intellectuels —, leur pouvoir est en soi une mutilation’.⁸³⁰

Throughout his later work Raoul Vaneigem consistently defines religion as the alienated consciousness—the collection of institutions, social roles, ideas and

⁸²⁷ *Libre-Esprit*, p. 32.

⁸²⁸ *De l’inhumanité*, p. 25-26.

⁸²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸³⁰ *Libre-Esprit*, p. 42.

attitudes—that arose out of and legitimated the hierarchical principal of a society based on work and alienated praxis rather than free creativity or the praxis of pleasure. As such, Vaneigem places the origins of God in the series of hierarchical separations that the division of intellectual and manual labour brought about: ‘L’institution du principe hiérarchique est le germe morbide d’où s’engendre l’idée de Dieu, inanité tonitruante qui s’enfle à chaque fois qu’un homme donne des ordres et que l’un de ses semblables obtempère’.⁸³¹ For Vaneigem the very idea of a God is therefore a fundamentally inhuman and hierarchical concept that has no other origin than the historical development of pre-capitalist societies. This is a point of view that is quite invariable throughout his oeuvre. In *Traité*, for example, Vaneigem defines God as both the idea of hierarchy and its self-justification: ‘Qu’est ce que Dieu? Le garant et la quintessence du mythe où se justifie la domination de l’homme par l’homme. La dégoûtante invention n’a pas d’autre excuse’.⁸³² It is important to note the palpable disgust of Vaneigem here towards the concept of God. For him it is tied to the notion of a narcissistic or life denying consciousness. It is a notion of being no longer connected to any real existing body. God in this sense mirrors the schism between the mind and the body in alienated subjects.

Indeed, for Raoul Vaneigem the economic relationship, as we have seen, implies not only a separation between thought and practice but it also brings about a fragmentation of the entirety of human being. It is the alienation and suppression of emotion, desire, feeling and gratuity in general. Vaneigem sees religion as an integral part of the reproduction of this separation and as such it amounts to a denial of humanity: ‘La religion est la forme plus achevée du mépris dont les hommes s’accablent. Partout où les Dieux sont honorés, les peuples n’ont d’humain que le

⁸³¹ *De l’inhumanité*, p. 65.

⁸³² *Traité*, p. 153.

nom'.⁸³³ As this suggests, human beings and gods cannot live in harmony together. The very idea of honouring a god implies a disdain for the concrete needs and desires of human beings. Vaneigem states that religion achieves the reproduction of this alienation of human being through a number of economic attitudes that, he implies, are essential to all denominations. These include:

le sacrifice, la résignation, la culpabilité, la haine de soi, la peur de la jouissance, le péché, le rachat, la dénaturation et ces illusoires dépassements où se perpétuent en fait l'impuissance de l'homme à devenir humain, la croyance en son incurable imbécilité, le blanc-seing accordé à une Banque céleste et à ses actionnaires.⁸³⁴

The association of religion here with a celestial banking house is obviously meant to evoke the point that religion is essentially an abstract way of thinking that arises from the practice of exchange. Moreover, this long list of negative attributes is by no means exhaustive. Vaneigem also insists that misogyny is inherent to all religions.⁸³⁵ It is not by chance either that nearly all of these qualities are also those that Vaneigem associates with capitalist social life. As we saw in the previous chapters, Vaneigem closely links alienated praxis to guilt, a fear of pleasure and false forms of emancipation. The implication is that these attitudes are essential to the reproduction of economic social relationships, first in agrarian societies and now in modern commodity society. This latter idea, that capitalism has its origins in religion, is a point that will be explored below. For now it is enough to note that the definition of religion Vaneigem develops is thoroughly coloured by his engagement with Lowen and his rejection of the fear of pleasure. In a certain sense, for Vaneigem, religion *is* the fear of pleasure, or at least its earliest form.

⁸³³ *De l'inhumanité*, p. 21.

⁸³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁸³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Vaneigem argues that these economic and pleasure fearing attitudes penetrated human consciousness through the internalisation of the hierarchical separations that an economic approach to nature created. In hunter-gatherer societies, Vaneigem states, the world and the self were understood in terms of a 'jeu des analogies' where consciousness of the self encompassed both the body and the earth; Vaneigem states that in the context of such societies it makes no sense to project backwards our own binary categories, such as rationality and irrationality, cause and effect, interior and exterior, mind and body, material and immaterial.⁸³⁶ It is only with the advent of religion, for Vaneigem, that humanity is faced with these kinds of dualisms that are a barrier to self-realisation. One might reasonably argue therefore that Vaneigem suggests that there is an innocence to these pre-agrarian, pre-religious societies that is similar to the *gratuité* and *nouvelle innocence*, mentioned in the previous chapter, that might be possible on the other side of capitalist relationships. This is why he is fascinated by pre-religious, pre-agrarian societies. They were based on a natural impulse to pleasure.

Vaneigem argues that the fundamental difference between these societies and our own, on a subjective level, is the schism embodied in religion between the mind and the body. As was noted in the previous chapter, in French the term 'esprit' can mean both mind and body. The continuation of the religious notion of a soul and the philosophical category of mind is therefore much more obvious in modern French than in English. Vaneigem plays on this dual meaning in his work. In his later writing the 'esprit' is associated with the concept from Lowen of a consciousness that oppresses the body and with *la pensée séparée*. Vaneigem terms it the 'forme aliénée

⁸³⁶ Ibid., p. 39-40.

de la conscience du corps'.⁸³⁷ He argues that the spirit is a form of consciousness that disdains the senses.⁸³⁸ Although it is in fact a product of a real physical being it denies earthly desires and punishes the body in the name of religious authority.⁸³⁹ Indeed, Vaneigem defines the 'esprit' as the primary separation at the heart of all other forms of alienation: 'il est l'abstraction essentielle, la barbarie originelle qui arrache sa part vivante à chaque individu et le métamorphose en une machine dont la fonction est de produire pour survivre'.⁸⁴⁰ The *esprit*, Vaneigem argues here, dominates the body just as the intellectual the manual labourer, the master the slave, the sky the earth, the man the woman and so on to every other hierarchy in human experience. These arguments are of course intimately related to his theory of praxis as the human body in its creatively conscious pursuit of pleasure. The religious mode of being, Vaneigem suggests, creates a fragmented subjectivity capable of self-mutilation, domination and submission. The religious notion of a spirit, as Vaneigem describes it, is therefore part of the same logic of suppression and repression discussed in the previous chapter. The 'esprit' is the abstract consciousness produced by the fear of pleasure in the religious, and later the capitalist, subject. Indeed, Vaneigem describes this in exactly the same language as Lowen employs: 'l'esprit est le crime perpétré contre l'intelligence sensible, contre la seule intelligence *créatrice*, celle grâce à laquelle l'enfant découvre, à travers le labyrinthe de ses sensations agréables, son véritable devenir humain'.⁸⁴¹

Vaneigem relates the existence of the 'esprit' in this sense to one of the defining aspects of religion: sacrifice. For Vaneigem, sacrifice is the notion that one must submit to suffering in the name of some kind of abstract necessity or authority,

⁸³⁷ Ibid., p. 104.

⁸³⁸ Ibid.

⁸³⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 77.

⁸⁴¹ Ibid., p. 105.

religious or otherwise. In other words, sacrifice is the idea that there is such a thing as useful suffering. Vaneigem argues that this notion developed in tandem with work as an economic necessity.⁸⁴² The gods repay the curse of labour with spiritual rewards.⁸⁴³ As such, Vaneigem says, religion makes sacrosanct ‘l’exil de soi’, i.e. the fear of pleasure, that was created by the transition to a form of production based on abstract necessities.⁸⁴⁴ Vaneigem therefore argues that religion makes the suffering embodied in alienated praxis a sacred duty by situating it within a transcendental order or metaphysics of survival. Vaneigem suggests that the notion of sacrifice is therefore essential in making subjects complicit in their own exploitation and the exploitation of others. Indeed, in *Traité* Vaneigem explicitly states that it is this mechanism on which all hierarchical power is fundamentally based: ‘c’est toujours le principe de souffrance utile et du sacrifice consenti qui constitue la base la plus solide du pouvoir hiérarchisé’.⁸⁴⁵ As such, sacrifice reflects the fundamental fear of pleasure that is at the heart of religion and hierarchical social life. It amounts to an absolute denial of the praxis of pleasure that Vaneigem argues is the essence of who we are. This is the essential inhumanity of religion.

Capitalism as Religion

As Timothy Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith note, one of the defining characteristics of Situationist critique was ‘to think world-historically in the teeth of specialists from Left and Right’.⁸⁴⁶ The relationship between feudalism and modern society was one that was constantly examined by the Situationists. This was, of

⁸⁴² Ibid., p. 104.

⁸⁴³ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁵ *Traité*, p. 58.

⁸⁴⁶ Clark and Smith, ‘Why art can’t kill the SI’, p. 25.

course, an element of critique that was central also to the work of Marx. In many respects Marx sees the criticism of religion as fundamental to the criticism of capitalism. Indeed, he famously states that ‘the critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique’.⁸⁴⁷ Marx originally emerged out of the Young Hegelian school of thought that critiqued religion as a form of fetishism, a product of the human imagination that is invested with human powers and comes in turn to dominate mankind. What was so original about Marx was to apply the critique of fetishism, a religious form, to capitalism. As we saw in Chapter 1 of the current work, Vaneigem, drawing on Marx, sees capitalist social life as dominated by concrete-abstractions, in particular the Marxian idea of a commodity fetishism. It is the production of commodities for the realisation of an exchange value, an abstraction, that drives modern life, not the realisation of concrete human needs and desires. In this sense capitalism was, for Marx, the continuation of a fundamental religiosity, albeit in a more concrete form.

The writing of the Situationists often evoked this notion that capitalism was in some sense religion made concrete. For example, Debord begins *La Société du Spectacle* with a quote from *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) by the Young Hegelian author Ludwig Feuerbach.⁸⁴⁸ The Spectacle, for Debord, is the logic of religion spread throughout all aspects of everyday life. Rather than directly living our lives, our experiences and actions are mediated by representations that have escaped our control. The Spectacle therefore continues the religious form but in the sense of an almost infinite number of fragmentary abstract mediations in our lives, whereas in

⁸⁴⁷ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* [1844] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.131.

⁸⁴⁸ ‘Et sans doute notre temps ... préfère l'image à la chose, la copie à l'original, la représentation à la réalité, l'apparence à l'être ... Ce qui est *sacré* pour lui, ce n'est que l'*illusion*, mais ce qui est profane, c'est la *vérité*. Mieux, le sacré grandit à ses yeux à mesure que décroît la vérité et que l'illusion croît, si bien que *le comble de l'illusion* est aussi pour lui *le comble du sacré*’, cited in Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 766.

feudal society, where religion dominated, it was all united in the single fetishism of God. Raoul Vaneigem expresses exactly the same idea in *Traité*, albeit in a slightly different manner. Vaneigem argues that on the level of ideas fetishism in feudal society was founded upon myth, a story that united all of humanity in worship of a God who sanctified the terrestrial power of feudal lords and the suffering this hierarchical social make up imposed.⁸⁴⁹ The lord mythically sacrifices himself in service to God, while the serfs really sacrifice themselves for mythical power (such as eternal life).⁸⁵⁰ This myth created an illusory unity, albeit fully realised in the society, between all aspects of life. Although this mythical society was a form of alienation, it was still one that was founded to a great extent on qualitative notions of human being. Vaneigem states, for example, that religious sacrifice was an archaic form of exchange that was based in a non-quantifiable and non-rational magical transfer.⁸⁵¹ Power was therefore limited to a specific relationship of direct exploitation of the producers that did not enter into a dynamic process of abstraction, only a static, though effective, one dominated by God and feudal lords. Vaneigem argues that the bourgeois revolutions that finally brought capitalism fully into being broke this myth, and human society, into fragments.⁸⁵² God in this sense died but continued as fragments of divine power, i.e. abstract necessities or justifications of suffering, that became more spread out and shared among modern capitalist subjects.⁸⁵³ Where feudal society rested on a unity established by a single myth, bourgeois society desperately attempts to re-establish such unity but can only do so in fragmentary form through ideology, which being only a fragmentary perspective, ultimately makes this

⁸⁴⁹ *Traité*, p. 71.

⁸⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁸⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸⁵³ 'La retombée lente d'infimes fragments issus du vieux mythe explosé répand partout la poussière du sacré, une poussière qui silicose l'esprit et la volonté de vivre. Les contraintes sont devenues moins occultes, plus grossières, moins puissantes, plus nombreuses', *ibid.*, p. 27.

task impossible.⁸⁵⁴ The different aspects of life, which were united by God in the past, developed in capitalism into separate spheres of activity, that is to say, the economy, which comes to dominate mankind in a more fragmentary and dynamic way than any previous form of fetishism. Exchange becomes more abstract; it is quantified and rationalised in the money form.⁸⁵⁵ Thus, for Vaneigem, the mystical sacrifice of religion in feudal society becomes in commodity society an ever more abstract and fragmentary one, less singular and more widespread.

In the later work of Raoul Vaneigem the notion of a continuation of religion in capitalist society becomes tied to the notion of a fear of pleasure. Vaneigem claims, for example, that even in his critique of capitalist society, Marx ignored the extent to which his own critical approach was marred by economic reflexes.⁸⁵⁶ Vaneigem specifically has in mind the notion of a *pensée séparée* or, as he puts it here, a ‘Dieu résiduel sur la matière du travail’.⁸⁵⁷ Presumably, Vaneigem is referring here to the fact that Marx oscillated between the dialectical refusal of capitalist society based on the theory of commodity fetishism and the more empiricist approach that led him at times to see the development of productive forces as a positive. In this sense, for Vaneigem, the least radical aspects of Marx still reproduce the religious intellectual function of the mind dominating the body in aspects of his work: the justification of suffering. As we saw above, it is this domination of the mind over the body, the denial of self, that Vaneigem feels is most characteristic of religion. Vaneigem states that although we may consider ourselves, in the words of Prévert, ‘intacts de Dieu’, religious attitudes are just as prevalent today.⁸⁵⁸ Religion, for Vaneigem, is defined not just by the objective form that the fetishism takes on the level of social

⁸⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 71

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 101-103.

⁸⁵⁶ *Libre-Esprit*, p. 31

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁸ *De l’inhumanité*, p. 13-14.

organisation but also by its subjective form: the internalisation of fetishistic attitudes that abstract us from ourselves and reality. In this sense Vaneigem sees capitalist society as in many respects that which preserves religion: ‘L’esprit religieux ressuscite partout où se perpétuent le sacrifice, la résignation, la culpabilité, la haine de soi, le peur de la jouissance, le péché, le rachat, la dénaturation et l’impuissance de l’homme à devenir humain’.⁸⁵⁹ For Vaneigem, religion was only the earlier form of what he sees as the fear of pleasure. Capitalist society still embodies all of the attitudes of this fear and, arguably, at a more banal level than at any other point in history. The feudal and the capitalist subject are both defined by their fear of pleasure though this may be expressed differently. It is for this reason that feudal society, and religious societies generally, provide an important historical site of interest for Vaneigem in understanding the origins of the barbarism of capitalist society and possible ways to escape it.

Heresy, Mysticism and the Language of Alchemy

The Situationist interest in religion went much further than the critique of its form and expression in feudal and capitalist societies. Even one of the earliest reviewers of *Traité*, Robert Kanter, notes the interest of Vaneigem in the millenarian heresies of the middle ages (and somewhat facetiously likened the SI to them).⁸⁶⁰ In their 1967 texts, for example, both Vaneigem and Debord make reference to the *Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) by Norman Cohn, a study that examines the history of these movements.⁸⁶¹ The thesis of Cohn is that these heretical movements mark the origins

⁸⁵⁹ *Libre-Esprit*, p. 13.

⁸⁶⁰ Kanter, op. cit.

⁸⁶¹ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* [1957] (London: Pimlico, 1993).

of the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. However, the Situationists put a more interesting spin on the history revealed by Cohn. Debord argues that the aim of these millenarian sects to realise a paradise on Earth that abolished work and hierarchy embodies the first expression of the totalising goal of modern revolutionary movements.⁸⁶² Their failure was to have looked to God and external leaders to make this a reality rather than to have made history themselves.⁸⁶³ Equally, in *Traité* Vaneigem states that today humanity has the means to realise the state of freedom desired by the heretics of Souabe, Germany, in 1270. In this instance Vaneigem quotes Cohn directly: ‘S’étant élevé au-dessus de Dieu et ayant atteint le degré de la perfection divine, ils avaient abandonné Dieu’.⁸⁶⁴ While Debord never went on to develop these ideas in his later writing, Raoul Vaneigem certainly has in astounding depth. Previous to Cohn there were a number of Marxists, Engels included, who have seen certain heretical movements such as the Anabaptists of Munster as proto-versions of the modern proletarian revolution. Cohn argues that the barbarity of this period and its heresies is realised in modern totalitarianism. However, Vaneigem differs from both the Marxists and Cohn in his definition of religion. As we have seen, for Vaneigem, religion is a social relationship that schisms the human personality, it oppresses the body in the name of the ‘esprit’ and therefore embodies a fear of pleasure. Vaneigem is therefore interested in Christian heresies of the past to the extent that they do or do not represent a resistance to this essence of the religious form.

The most important work in this respect is *La Résistance au Christianisme* published in 1993. In this text Raoul Vaneigem amalgamated earlier research from his first book on religion, *Le Mouvement du Libre-Esprit*, with an expanded account of

⁸⁶² Debord, *Œuvres*, pp. 826-827.

⁸⁶³ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁴ Cohn cited in *Traité*, p. 215.

the history of Christianity that extends right back to Ancient Judaism and all the way forward to the emergence of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The exposition that Vaneigem gives of the development of Christianity in this work is highly Marxian. The arrival of each new religious orthodoxy is presented as a process whereby theological doctrine adapts to concrete historical changes in the organisation of the society and period in question. Just one example is the appearance of a ‘synchrétisme monothéiste’ in Judaism that Vaneigem assigns to the historical development of a centralised monarchical state, which brought together a number of previously independent Jewish tribes in around 1000 B.C.⁸⁶⁵ Another example is the later Hellenisation of Christianity, which, Vaneigem argues, reflects at the level of abstract thought the transition from a more agrarian society to one based on the dynamic mercantile landscape of Greco-Roman imperialism.⁸⁶⁶ As such, Vaneigem suggests that each new stage in the development of Christianity can be understood as a response to the transformation of concrete social relationships rather than a purely ideal innovation.

In contrast to traditional Marxist approaches, however, Vaneigem does not believe in escapable stages or a teleological development of history. In *La Résistance au christianisme*, and his other works on this subject, Vaneigem attempts to uncover precisely those real historical individuals who resisted the dominance of religion in their own times. He does not mean this necessarily in the rationalist or atheistic sense but rather he thinks of this resistance more in terms of a battle against religion, where the religion is defined as the contemporary expression of *la peur de jouissance* or fear of pleasure. Vaneigem states explicitly that he tasks himself in these works with

⁸⁶⁵ *La Résistance*, p. 17.

⁸⁶⁶ *L'inhumanité*, p. 130-131.

tracing the existence of the ‘vivant’ in the pre-Modern past.⁸⁶⁷ He tells us that he wants to do this in order to break with our pious image of the Christian Middle Ages.⁸⁶⁸ In a certain sense then, these works of history could be seen as an extension of what Vaneigem attempts to do in his essays: to reveal the hidden impulse to pleasure that he believes is the foundation of any real movement of human emancipation. It should be clear then that Vaneigem is not just interested in heresy haphazardly. Indeed, for the most part Vaneigem defines heresy simply as the negative reflection of the orthodox rather in its overcoming.⁸⁶⁹ The majority of what is termed heresy has historically been little more than a new religion in the making.⁸⁷⁰ He defines Protestantism, for example as a heresy that became an orthodoxy.⁸⁷¹ In other words, most ‘heresy’ is still religious in the sense that it embodies the same life-denying fear of pleasure and imprecation to suffering that, for Vaneigem at least, defines religion. In contrast, what Vaneigem is above all fascinated by are those so-called ‘heresies’ which embodied an outright rejection of the essentially life denying character of religion by refusing all of its attitudes in favour of the *vivant*.

In this vein Vaneigem proposes a number of figures throughout the history of Western civilisation that he believes entered into this current of resistance and were thereby branded heretics. The earliest example that he gives is a gnostic named Simon of Samaria, a Hellenised Samaritan who appeared around the end of the first century B.C. Vaneigem, evoking the famous phrase by Marx referred to earlier in the current work, states that the writing of Simon represents the product of a ‘volonté radicale’, in the sense that it gets at the ‘roots’ (*racines*) of human being.⁸⁷² He tells us that Simon

⁸⁶⁷ *Libre-Esprit*, p. 18.

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶⁹ *Les Controverses*, p. 122.

⁸⁷⁰ ‘Les hérésies sont des religions qui n’ont pas réussi, ou pas encore’, *ibid.*, p. 204.

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁸⁷² *La Résistance*, p. 67.

spoke of a ‘Grand Puissance’ or Great Power that could be understood as the visible and invisible ‘Feu’ or Fire at the heart of life and the cosmos.⁸⁷³ Vaneigem interprets this to mean that Simon is talking about the nature of the energy of life, which he says is both conscious and unconscious.⁸⁷⁴ In order to make sense of this we have to consider what Vaneigem says here in the context of his arguments about the nature of ‘life’ discussed in the previous chapter. For Vaneigem, Simon is talking in his own way about the necessity of conceiving of the self as an integral personality, a mind and a body as one. Vaneigem shows us how Simon reads Ancient Jewish texts from *Genesis* to *Deuteronomy* as a metaphor for the individual in the process of coming to consciousness of this source of life.⁸⁷⁵ The subject learns through perfecting her senses that the Great Power is present in her. In turn she realises that she is able to encourage and recreate this power through her the creation of her own destiny.⁸⁷⁶ Again, the similarities between this discourse and the sensual intelligence that Vaneigem calls for in his later work are patently clear. Indeed, for Vaneigem, Simon is really expressing the notion of a praxis of pleasure very similar to what he himself imagines, albeit in religious language. The Great Power is made manifest in the human ability both to create new life through desire and also through the ability of our desire to constantly recreate the natural potentiality of human life.⁸⁷⁷ Vaneigem argues that the Great Power that Simon speaks of is essentially the consciousness of the permanent movement of sexual energy that places a person in charge of their own destiny.⁸⁷⁸ As such, Vaneigem argues that Simon is rejecting religion because he is

⁸⁷³ Ibid., p. 68.

⁸⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid.

asking us to become God.⁸⁷⁹ Simon is so important to Vaneigem because he was the most vociferous writer of the past to reject the mind-body schism, the fear of pleasure, that is reflected in the dominance of the heavens over the earth, of God and authority over man.⁸⁸⁰ In fact, Vaneigem focuses in particular on the attempt of Simon to translate the myths of the Old Testament not into an abstract otherworldly symbolism but into a language of self-realisation rooted in the blood, sperm, placenta, the spine, the bladder, the arteries and the foetus: the living matter of humanity. As far as Vaneigem is concerned, such closeness to the concreteness of the body as part of a conception of human being is an affront to the essence of religion, which prefers to spiritualise mankind and disdains the powers of the terrestrial self.

Within the context of Medieval Europe the main focus for Raoul Vaneigem is the heresy of the 'Libre-Esprit' or Free Spirit that was the subject of his 1986 publication. Vaneigem argues that the members of the Free Spirit were not defined by adherence to a particular doctrine. Rather, he states that the Free Spirit embodies a collection of different ideas or attitudes by which a number of different groups and individuals can be brought together between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸⁸¹ Vaneigem asserts that, in contrast to other brands of 'heresy' such as Protestantism, the Free Spirit was a movement that was not only hostile towards the Church but also, and most crucially, against religious forms themselves.⁸⁸² That is to say, for Vaneigem, the Free Spirit was a far more radical phenomenon than a mere heresy. It was an outright rejection of religion as he defines it.

The essential idea behind the Free Spirit movement was that mankind is God. This position was put forward in several different ways. The first was that the death of

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid, p. 285.

⁸⁸² *Les Controverses*, p. 241.

Christ on the cross had freed mankind of sin. Vaneigem notes that the members of the Free Spirit believed that this sacrifice effectively meant no person ever had to pay for their sins again through suffering, guilt, penitence and submission to the Church.⁸⁸³ The second, perhaps even more radical position (though it does not appear the two were by any means mutually exclusive), was that God was everywhere present in the world and in the individual body. As such, they argued, a person acting in accordance with their nature represents nothing more than ‘God’ creating himself in each moment.⁸⁸⁴ A similar argument was that poverty dispensed a person from guilt because it imbued the poor with divine grace.⁸⁸⁵ Effectively, Vaneigem states, this meant that, for those of the Free Spirit, if a person became conscious of the divine presence in them they could realise themselves as an ‘homme-Dieu’, literally man-God.⁸⁸⁶ It is significant that Vaneigem does not use the term ‘demi-dieu’ here because it shows he means that human beings completely abolish the idea of any heavenly power beyond themselves. As such the Free Spirit, despite its religious language, effectively embodies a kind of atheism.

Vaneigem demonstrates that the rejection of guilt and sin by the members of the Free Spirit went hand-in-hand with a condemnation of suffering and sacrifice. Perhaps most crucial in this respect is the fact that they rejected work and, most subversively in their historical context, stated that prayers have no value when they are undertaken under the ‘yoke’ (*joug*) of manual labour.⁸⁸⁷ The Free Spirit also condemned fasting, flagellation and observing the Sabbath as actions that prevent human beings from perfecting themselves and their qualities.⁸⁸⁸ Moreover, it was said

⁸⁸³ *La Résistance*, p. 286.

⁸⁸⁴ *Les Controverses*, p. 200

⁸⁸⁵ *La Résistance*, p. 295.

⁸⁸⁶ *Les Controverses*, p. 200.

⁸⁸⁷ *La Résistance*, p. 290.

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

that a person should not preoccupy themselves with bitterness or faults that they had once committed in the past because the focus on suffering would prevent their ability to realise themselves more completely.⁸⁸⁹ Vaneigem also notes that sexual liberation was a key aspect of the Free Spirit. Contemporaries described its followers as giving themselves over to ‘stupor’ (*stupre*), adultery and other pleasures of the body (*jouissance du corps*) in the name of charity.⁸⁹⁰ Further, in contrast to religion, Vaneigem argues that the Free Spirit saw in women the basis of a doctrine which held that the experience of love negates the then dominant institutions: God, the Church and the State.⁸⁹¹ For the Free Spirit, Vaneigem asserts, ‘la femme n’est ni objet de viol ni sujet spiritualisé’.⁸⁹² That the emancipation of women was a significant aspect of the Free Spirit is underlined, for Vaneigem, by the important place they had as its advocates. The key figure in this respect is Marguèrite Porète who, like Vaneigem, was a native of Hainaut.⁸⁹³ Porète promoted a doctrine of pure love that identified amorous delight (*jouissance amoureuse*) with a unity of the body and the spirit.⁸⁹⁴ According to Vaneigem, Porète stated that this *jouissance* could recreate the state of man before the fall, a state of innocence without sin or guilt.⁸⁹⁵ Through the pleasures of love, Porète argues, human beings awake to the God in them and, in so doing, they attain a state of perfection that releases them from all of the suffering and constraints of contemporary society.⁸⁹⁶ Crucially, this new Eden was not to be put off until the afterlife but it was to be realised in the present. Porète was later burned as a heretic by the Church in 1310.⁸⁹⁷

⁸⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 288.

⁸⁹¹ *Les Controverses*, p. 108.

⁸⁹² *La Résistance*, p. 295.

⁸⁹³ Ibid., p. 291.

⁸⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 289.

⁸⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 293.

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 292

Thus, where religion orients human practice around an inherent guilt that must be paid for through suffering and a rejection of earthly pleasures, the Free Spirit, Vaneigem argues, essentially called for a practice of pleasure based on a unified self that privileged the human relationship with the body, the earth, desire and, what he calls, ‘ce flux de vie’ that is incessantly being created in everyday life.⁸⁹⁸ For Vaneigem, this refusal of sacrifice in favour of self-realisation that characterised the movement of the Free Spirit makes it the very opposite of a religion. The Free Spirit, for Vaneigem, is not therefore a ‘heresy’ in the usual sense. He asserts that its notion of a unity between man and nature that could be perfected on earth through the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of the self and others is completely at odds with the usual logic of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.⁸⁹⁹ Both of the latter simply reproduce the ascetic and self-denying rejection of this unity and sanctify suffering.⁹⁰⁰ While contemporary inquisitors may have classified it as a heresy, today, Vaneigem argues, it is clear that the Free Spirit enters into the project of the ‘homme total’, the *vivant*, in its rejection of the economy.⁹⁰¹ It is proof, for Vaneigem, that human beings have always resisted the morbid and fetishistic societies into which they have been born. That Barnard terms this interest of Vaneigem in the Free Spirit ‘reactionary’ is bizarre given that what Vaneigem values so much about this movement is precisely its respect for the freedom of women, its rejection of work and its refusal of religion.⁹⁰² As Vaneigem himself suggests above, to imply that the people of the Middle Ages were not just as capable of a radical subjectivity as ourselves is to condemn humankind to a teleology of suffering that has always been the best argument of power. Indeed, in certain respects, such as the primacy it accorded to women and to pleasure, the Free Spirit

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 285.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁰¹ Ibid.

⁹⁰² Barnard, p. 124.

was far more radical than much of the extreme left of the revolutionary workers' movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perhaps only Fourier came as close.

It is in this context also that we should seek to understand the appropriation of the language of alchemy and mysticism in the work of Raoul Vaneigem. Although these phenomena of the past may have expressed ideas in a non-rationalist and even religious language, for Raoul Vaneigem they still reflect a conscious attempt to convey the idea of a liberating human practice of pleasure. For example, in *Traité*, Vaneigem says that he wants to make *concrete* (*concrétiser*) the mystical language of Sister Katrei: 'Tout ce qui est en moi est en moi, tout ce qui est en moi est en dehors de moi, tout ce qui est en moi est partout autour de moi, tout ce qui est en moi est à moi et je ne vois partout que ce qui est en moi'.⁹⁰³ Here Vaneigem is saying that the language of mysticism expresses the desire for a world wherein human beings can freely objectify themselves in nature so that there is a unity between us and our environment. The quality of our environment will reflect the quality of our own lives. Although Anselm Jappe claims that Vaneigem strays into an immediate identity of the self and the world in his interest in mysticism, it is clear that this is not the case. In another example Vaneigem specifically states that he wants to realise in 'praxis' another mystical quotation: 'Dieu ne peut rien savoir, désirer ou faire sans moi. Avec Dieu, je me suis crée et j'ai créé toutes les choses, et c'est ma main qui soutient le ciel, la terre et toutes les créatures. Sans moi, rien n'existe'.⁹⁰⁴ For Vaneigem this is not a solipsistic or narcissistic statement. Rather it is the expression of a person who wishes to accede to a world wherein their concrete needs and desires, and those of their fellows, come before abstract necessity. It is not an immediate unity but one that is in

⁹⁰³ Cited in *Traité*, p. 302. Sister Katrei was a heretical German mystic of the early-fourteenth century.

⁹⁰⁴ Cited in *Traité*, p. 281.

a constant state of transformation through the mediation of what is explicitly thought of as social and revolutionary *praxis*. Vaneigem does not advocate mysticism here. On the contrary, he is doing a *détournement* of its language, an implicit critique that directs and improves the original meaning towards something real and concrete.

The same is equally true of the language of alchemy that Raoul Vaneigem employs in his later work. There can be little doubt that Vaneigem was influenced in this respect by the work of Carl Jung who proposes that the alchemical process embodies archetypal symbols of the subconscious and the psyche in their development towards realisation.⁹⁰⁵ As one might expect, in the language of the later work of Raoul Vaneigem this process is identified with the praxis of pleasure. The *Grand-Œuvre* of alchemy, originally the turning of base metals into gold or the creation of the Philosopher's Stone that gives eternal life and riches, is associated by Vaneigem with the goals of the creative individual of an emancipated praxis.⁹⁰⁶ Equally, the *materia prima*, the base metal that is transmuted into the new, more perfect substance, Vaneigem ties to the Lowenian conception of the human body that he develops in his work.⁹⁰⁷ The *materia prima* is thus the *vivant*, the living substance of human being. Vaneigem therefore conceives of liberated praxis as an 'alchimie du moi'.⁹⁰⁸ Just as the alchemist sought to bring back life and transform dead matter, so the modern capitalist subject is faced with the task of bringing its own substance, its body, back to life through a liberating desire-driven process of creation.⁹⁰⁹ If there is to be a transformation of our society, Vaneigem argues, it will be based in our ability to communicate with that part of us that is still living despite the self-denial into which we have been conducted. For Vaneigem, the language of alchemy serves as a

⁹⁰⁵ See Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (London: Routledge, 1980).

⁹⁰⁶ *Adresse aux vivants*, p. 205.

⁹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

metaphor, or a symbol, for that revolutionary praxis based in this search for pleasure that will realise our humanity and bring us back to life as human beings: ‘Dans le sentiment que seule la recherche du plaisir nourrit et stimule la création de soi et du monde réside le Grand-Œuvre, la poésie orphique qui a percé le secret des êtres et des choses et amadoué, parce qu'ils gardent de vivant, les plus redoutables furies de la vie refoulée’.⁹¹⁰

The religious criticism of Raoul Vaneigem, in particular his interest in heresy, is perhaps one of the most original aspects of his later work. That Vaneigem at times employs the lexicon of mysticism and alchemy should not detract from the fact that there is a serious theoretical point behind the use of this poetic language. It is tempting to think of many of these texts as purely historical works that have no bearing on how we should think of the contemporary struggle against capital. However, this is clearly not how Vaneigem himself conceives of them. They are explicitly not ‘objective’ approaches to the historical material but rather an attempt to uncover both the history of inhumanity and the resistance to it that, for Vaneigem, has defined human life to a greater or lesser extent since the agricultural revolution. They provide evidence that the *volonté de vivre*, this desire on the part of human beings to make their own concrete needs and desires the prime motor of life, is an inherent aspect of human experience that, from the Movement of the Free Spirit to the Paris Commune of 1871, is forever asserting itself against the barbarism of the fear of pleasure and the self denial it demands. Vaneigem is clear that the struggle against ‘religion’, in this sense, is just as important today as ever it was in the feudal societies of the past.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 205.

Conclusion. The Revolution of Everyday Life Today

The central aim of this thesis was to provide an analysis and exposition of the theory of Raoul Vaneigem and his contribution to the SI in order to revise our understanding of his life and work and the position he should occupy in the critical field. The findings that have been made in the course of this thesis should therefore form the basis for just such a radical reappraisal of who Vaneigem is and the critical interest that he warrants in any study of the Situationists and modern revolutionary theory. As was noted in the Introduction to the current work, Vaneigem has up to this point occupied a largely anecdotal presence in histories of the SI. Over the years, the actual content of his arguments and language has been subject to myriad misinterpretations and, at times, simply ignored. The result is that Vaneigem has often been dismissed by critics and compared in a negative light against the figure of Guy Debord who, in contrast, has recently come to be seen as one of the greatest French thinkers of the twentieth century.

As we saw in the Introduction, however, Debord himself never rejected the contribution of Raoul Vaneigem to the Situationist International. He did not claim that he and Vaneigem disagreed on fundamental issues in the 1960s. Rather, Debord saw *Traité* and *La Société du Spectacle* as works of theory that mutually supported each other precisely because of the fact that they came at the same arguments from two very different directions. It should be remembered, moreover, that these arguments were explicitly put forward as those of the Situationist International and cannot be said to belong exclusively to either figure alone. Further, even in his most vociferous and detailed critique, Debord maintained that Raoul Vaneigem marked the Situationist International more than any other member in the period of 1961-1964,

which, he himself states, laid the basis for the direction that led to the group's influence on May '68. When, in later life, Debord critiques Vaneigem it is for the direction that the latter took in his post-Situationist writing. Debord appears to have always argued that *Traité* was an important and influential text on modern revolutionary theory and that it deserved this position. His problems with Vaneigem are due to later disagreements. One cannot therefore look to Debord for justification of the marginalisation of Raoul Vaneigem in the history of the Situationist International. Moreover, as our critical survey demonstrated, during the original reception of the SI in the late-1960s Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord were read side by side as equal partners in the propagation of Situationist ideas. It is even possible that Vaneigem was more widely read among the May '68 generation than Debord. The historical record suggests therefore that Vaneigem's theory should occupy a place that is, at the very least, on a par with Guy Debord in any discussion of the Situationist influence on this period. It is only gradually, in the years since the dissolution of the SI in 1972, that Vaneigem and his expression of Situationist theory have been pushed to one side in critical discourse on the group.

That the critical theory of Raoul Vaneigem has been misunderstood was another issue that was highlighted by the critical survey. In part these misunderstandings can be seen as a reflection of the fact that Vaneigem has been marginalised but it is also a product of incorrect approaches to the Situationists as a whole. The vast majority of studies on the SI, Guy Debord included, have analysed the group from a cultural perspective. This is despite the fact that the Situationists sought the abolition of culture and that their primary activity was the creation of *revolutionary* ideas. Moreover, when there have been more ideas-based studies of the SI, these have often been from perspectives, such as postmodernism, that are entirely

anathema to Situationist discourse. Jappe and Barnard buck the trend in this respect and are by far the most interesting and accurate major studies of the SI. Even so, both in their assessment of Debord and the Situationists as a whole, they too tend to either pass over Vaneigem or offer superficial readings of his theory. The result is that ideas such as radical subjectivity, the will to live and survival sickness currently exist in the critical field as mostly empty words with no real meaning behind them.

In Chapter 1 therefore the thesis tasked itself with developing an exposition of the critical theory of Raoul Vaneigem from the bottom up. It was shown that Vaneigem puts forward a coherent Marxian critique of capitalist society based on the theory of praxis and its alienation. Indeed, in *Traité* Vaneigem is far more explicit in his development of these theories than Debord is in *La Société du Spectacle*. The theory of praxis forms the essential bedrock on which Vaneigem constructs a complex picture of human being and how it is systematically turned into its opposite through economic abstraction. He rejects all the basic fetishistic categories of capitalist society, from the spheres of production and circulation (work, money, the market, exchange, etc.) to the public and private spheres (the state, the family, leisure, art, culture, politics, consumption, etc.). Moreover, he exposes the traditional left as being as complicit as the right in the reproduction of these categories. Vaneigem argues that capitalist society can be overcome because it is not essential to human being. Humanity has a *volonté de vivre*, concrete needs and desires, that will always assert themselves against abstract necessity. 'Radical subjectivity' is the recognition, or a state of knowledge, that every human being shares this need for individual realisation and it is therefore the collective realisation of this need that forms the basis of human emancipation. Vaneigem asserts that the suppression of the *volonté de vivre* by capitalist society drives a *volonté de puissance*, its alienation, that pushes mankind to

inhumanity. Fetishistic social relations reduce human beings to a pseudo-animal state of mere survival where they can no longer consciously transform their world but must adapt to it. These are the conditions that define the modern revolutionary movement. It is clear therefore that Vaneigem does, indeed, have a clear and coherent Marxian-inspired critical theory. These theories need to be read as an integral part of the Situationist International and in relation to the work of Guy Debord who appreciated their critical power at the time. It is my hope that the definition of key terms and the exposition of core arguments that I have given in the current work will provide the basis for a better understanding of Raoul Vaneigem as a critical theorist in future research on the SI.

In revising our understanding of the theory of Raoul Vaneigem and his contribution to the SI, I felt that it was important to establish the specificity of his own historical context. As I noted in the critical survey, studies of the SI tend to focus exclusively on the French context to the exclusion of other regions, even though the group was quite explicitly international in its outlook and membership. The importance of the working-class background of Raoul Vaneigem, in Belgium's Pays Noirs, and the events of Hiver '60, which preceded his entrance into the SI, serve as an excellent example of why this should not be the case. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2 of the current work, Raoul Vaneigem's experience of working-class life in Hainaut was very much a driving force behind his original radicalisation. It was the context in which his critical theory first developed and it was recognised as such by the other members of the SI who gave him the tongue-in-cheek nickname 'Le Vampire du Borinage', after the local mining district. Although Henri Lefebvre was an original mediator, Vaneigem first made direct contact with Guy Debord during Hiver '60, a wildcat general strike that marked the zenith of the region's radical history of class

struggle. The events of Hiver '60 were foundational for the collaboration between Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord. Moreover, the experience of the strike served as a lesson about the complicity of the official left in capitalism that would come to the forefront of Situationist writing, particularly through the work of Raoul Vaneigem, in the coming years. Belgium's Hiver '60 is therefore a crucial perspective from which to understand the contribution of Vaneigem to the SI and also the eventual influence of the group on May '68 in France. This is a highly original addition to the history of the SI that complexifies our understanding of the group's development in this important period of transition.

In tandem with the new context of Hiver '60, this chapter also showed that the artistic avant-garde and counter-cultural movements of Hainaut have always served as an important point of reference for Raoul Vaneigem. Vaneigem argues that the Surrealists of Hainaut for the most part embodied a far more radical critique of capitalist society than the more artistic concerns offered by the Parisian Surrealists under the iron grip of André Breton. For Vaneigem, these *hennuyer* Surrealists developed a radical poetry that in many respects could be understood to have foreshadowed and paved the way for the Situationist International in the years to come. Of course, Vaneigem is ultimately one of Surrealism's most inveterate critics but he equally realises what is positive in the Surrealist revolt at its most lucid moments, such as the rejection of work, nationalism and other capitalist social forms. The fact that the Belgian Surrealists were a significant influence, and even a direct point of contact, for Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord suggests once again that, in all future studies, the Situationist International needs to be considered within a truly international context. Raoul Vaneigem, and perhaps the Situationist International in

general, can be situated within this broader tradition of ‘Belgian modernity’, which is characterised by distance, doubleness and negation.

The final part of establishing the intellectual background of Raoul Vaneigem was to explore the state of his critical thinking before he joined the SI. This was done mainly through an examination of his university *mémoire* on the work Isidore Ducasse, le Comte de Lautréamont, which was written in the mid-1950s. It was demonstrated that Vaneigem had already developed many aspects of his critical thinking in this period. Vaneigem shows a familiarity with important aspects of Western Marxist thought, from praxis to totality, and an ability to employ them in a highly original interpretation of an author who was not only important to the Surrealists but also to the Situationist International. Although there are many elements of traditional Marxism present in this work, it is clear that Vaneigem not only had a well-developed critique of culture in this period but he was also moving away from more traditional Marxist notions in order to develop his own critical framework. As such, it is evident that when, he joined the group, Vaneigem was already thinking on similar lines to the SI and had a relatively clear Marxian critical framework to bring to his engagement with it. This analysis of the university *mémoire* will therefore provide the field with a more complex picture of who Raoul Vaneigem was when he first became a member of SI in 1961.

Chapter 3 of the current work continued this historical reassessment of Raoul Vaneigem by providing the first detailed account of his active participation in the Situationist International as a member between 1961 and 1970. It was demonstrated that Vaneigem joined the SI in a period when the organisation was faced with an internal crisis. The previous year a left-right split had emerged within the SI between a minority of so-called ‘artists’ and the majority who were committed to the

development of the group as a revolutionary organisation. At the Gothenburg conference of August 1961, and in collaboration with Attila Kotányi and Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem was central to putting down an attempted coup by the right of the SI. Vaneigem argued for a reorientation of the organisation around the development of a coherent theory of revolutionary praxis as its central goal. In the months and years that followed Vaneigem played a crucial part in the development of this theory. He participated in internal debates within the SI, contributed to collaborative texts, and also made important additions through anonymous and named texts within *Internationale situationniste*, in particular 'Banalités de base', which provided the first clear definition of the importance of praxis for the SI. As a member of the group's Central Council, Vaneigem also had an active hand in many of the key decisions that shaped the later character of the group, including voting on the exclusion of the 'artists' of the SI for their failure to respond to this more resolute orientation around the development of revolutionary theory. From 1965 to the events of May '68, Vaneigem remained an important figure within the SI. He took part in the events of the Strasbourg Scandal of 1966 that earned the group international notoriety and led to the public interest that would later give *Traité* and *La Société du Spectacle* a wide readership upon their publication in the winter of 1967. Vaneigem also travelled to the United States in 1967 where he helped to set up an American section of the SI. During the events of May '68, Vaneigem was possibly the most widely read of the Situationists and he was on the ground in Paris as an active participant in the Movement of Occupations. In the post-'68 period, the relationship between Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord soured. Debord accused Vaneigem, among others, of resting on the laurels of early successes and for failing to contribute both qualitatively and quantitatively to the group. After a fraught discussion on the reorientation of the

SI, Raoul Vaneigem resigned from the group in November 1970. Vaneigem was therefore an important figure in the collective project that the SI embodied. Although he arrived after many Situationist positions had already been established in the late 1950s, Vaneigem, in partnership with Debord and others, came to define much of what was characteristic of the SI in the 1960s.

In Chapter 4 of the current work the thesis turned to a reassessment of the later, or post-Situationist, work of Raoul Vaneigem. These later works have been subject to a great deal of criticism both from Guy Debord and other critics such as Barnard. Debord argues that the later work of Vaneigem is laughable and that his ideas surrounding pleasure amount to a celebration of commodity society. Barnard, in turn, states that these later works seem to propose revolution as a permanent state of orgiastic gratification and that Vaneigem avoids totalising and collective action against capitalism. These criticisms, however, are ill-founded. Through a series of theoretical expositions, it was demonstrated that the arguments concerning pleasure that Vaneigem develops in these later works are based in a critical appropriation of the Reichian theory of pleasure developed by the American psychotherapist Alexander Lowen. Vaneigem, like Lowen, argues that to be human is to be a body. In his later work, Vaneigem argues that the body is the site of praxis and praxis itself is a natural function of the body. Praxis is characterised by a practice of pleasure wherein human beings consciously realise their concrete needs and desires. As such, pleasure is a quality of being that can be felt in every aspect of life. It is the sign of a person freely and consciously creating themselves and the world in everyday life. Vaneigem explicitly states that pleasure cannot be reduced to a pure state of orgiastic gratification. Equally, his notion of pleasure is a critique of what he sees as the false emancipation of pleasure in modern commodity society. The specific criticisms levied

against him by Debord and Barnard are therefore unfounded. For Vaneigem, the modern capitalist subject is defined not by the search for pleasure, or free creative praxis, as he defines it but rather by a *fear of pleasure*, alienated praxis. The capitalist subject is a schismatic personality that is cut off from the concrete needs and desires of its body. Instead it identifies exclusively with the social roles and commodified pseudo-pleasures offered to it as compensatory mechanisms for its denial of self. The emotions repressed as a result re-emerge in the form of the aggressive attitudes and inhumanity that characterise the barbarism of capitalist subjects: the will to power. Both Vaneigem and Lowen characterise this axis of being between the practice of pleasure and the fear of pleasure as a struggle between life and death.

In this later work Vaneigem also tries to address issues such as patriarchy and ecology that he rarely, if ever, treated as a member of the Situationist International. Vaneigem argues that patriarchy results from the move to a society founded upon abstract production where the creativity of women is reduced to childbearing alone. Society represses the feminine qualities in favour of masculine ones. Such a schism enters into the fear of pleasure and the fragmentation of self that drives it. Although he welcomes the fact that feminism has brought the issue of female emancipation to the centre of the discussion of human liberation, Vaneigem is also highly critical of forms of feminism that limit the emancipation of women to the winning of equal access to capitalist spheres of activity. The authentic liberation of women, for Raoul Vaneigem, requires the liberation of all of mankind from the economy. Vaneigem also sees the exploitation of the natural world as the product of submitting it to abstract necessities. The exploitation of human nature and nature itself go hand in hand. Vaneigem argues that mankind needs to re-establish a symbiotic relationship with nature based on its inherent abundance. Moreover, he asserts that capitalism is

currently collapsing due to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall finally pushing capital to an ultimate crisis. In its terminal phase capital will invest its last remaining resources in a green economy before ultimately disappearing from the face of the earth. Mankind is either faced at this point with its own destruction or the possible creation of an entirely new society.

The chapter concluded with an overview of the notion of an emancipated human subjectivity and civilisation that Vaneigem puts forward in his later work. Vaneigem terms his conception of liberating and liberated subjectivity, *le vivant*, the living or living being. The *vivant* has a great capacity for creation and empathy because it establishes and develops in a society that places the practice of pleasure, the individual and collective realisation of concrete human needs and desires, at the very centre of all social life. In his later work Vaneigem describes in great detail just how different a civilisation founded upon the *vivant* would be from our own. The quality of life and of the human beings who enjoy it would be defined by a richness and creativity that is completely foreign to contemporary society. In his utopian novel, *Voyage à Oarystsis*, and his *Déclaration des droits de l'être humain*, Vaneigem offers the most complete picture given by any member of the Situationist International of a genuinely communist society.

Chapter 5 completed our re-assessment of the later work of Raoul Vaneigem by providing an exposition and analysis of his religious criticism. It was demonstrated that Vaneigem believes religion was brought into being by the transition to an agrarian society where intellectual and manual labour were separated. Religion, Vaneigem argues, arose as the justification of this division, introducing the mind-body schism into human society and the human body, which reflects the hierarchical organisation of society. As such, Vaneigem defines religion as the ensemble of

inhuman attitudes that impose and reflect this denial of self or fear of pleasure: from guilt and fear to misogyny and sacrifice. Because these attitudes are still fundamental to the functioning of capitalist society, Vaneigem sees the contemporary world as in many ways the realisation or materialisation of religion but in a more fragmentary form. Capitalism does not abolish the essential character of religion, the domination of abstract necessity over concrete human needs and desires, it only makes this abstraction a more concrete reality than ever. In this vein, Vaneigem looks back to the Christian heresies of the past both to break with our pious vision of the Medieval world and to discover the *vivant* as a continual historical source of subversive power. Vaneigem focuses in particular on the Free Spirit heresy that in its denial of religious attitudes is, for him, a rejection of religion. With this established, the chapter concluded by proposing that the mystical and alchemical language employed by Vaneigem in his later work should not be taken as a celebration of mysticism but rather as a metaphorical language for the free praxis of pleasure, or first order mediation, that he sees as key to human emancipation.

Vaneigem is a prolific author. The vast majority of his work having been written and published after his time in the SI. As I noted in the Introduction to the current work, while it has become relatively standard to treat the later writing of Guy Debord as a legitimate continuation of Situationist argumentation, this has not been the case for Raoul Vaneigem up to this point. I hope that the exposition and analysis of the later work of Raoul Vaneigem that I have presented in this thesis will open up his post-Situationist writing to the critical field and a wider readership. It is time that this rich and exciting body of work be made an integral part of our understanding of the SI and its afterlives. However, it is also important that Vaneigem should not be

seen only through the lens of the history of the Situationist International. His critical theory still has important implications for us today.

The 2008 financial crisis appears to have marked a period of world-historical social transformation for humanity. In recent years riot and occupation have reared their heads in the centres of the richest nations. A series of democratic revolutions toppled one regime after another in the Near East in what became known as the ‘Arab Spring’. Greece has seen street fighting between anarchists and fascists in scenes reminiscent of the 1930s. While in Brazil there are currently huge street protests and waves of general strike action that speaks of profound fissures in society. It seems that new social movements are on the march almost everywhere a contemporary observer cares to look. Indeed, as many people noted even before the current crisis, the ‘end of history’ narrative that dominated the 1990s was short-lived. Is it the case then that the machine of socialisation is once again breaking down as it did in the 1960s? It is clear that an immense ocean of resentment, anger and frustration is at the root of this explosion of spontaneous activity. Unemployment is rife, real wages have plummeted since the 1970s and the intensity of work has only increased. At the same time, industrial expansion and global warming have not only destroyed much of the natural environment but are threatening the very existence of humanity in a way that the nuclear bomb threatened to do at the height of the Cold War.

But fear and resentment in themselves can only take a person so far. Indeed, they are more likely to lead one to a nostalgic view of the past and to cling more desperately to what one knows. It is perhaps for this reason that so much confusion seems to reign among our contemporary ‘anti-capitalists’. The idea that has the broadest support among the Occupy generation is of placing controls on capitalism. For them it is not capitalism itself that is at fault but its somehow ‘unfettered’ form.

The financial crisis is blamed on ‘greedy’ bankers, while poverty and injustice is largely seen as the product of a conspiracy of avaricious, privately-educated, elites. At best, the result has been the desire to return to a Keynesian model of capitalist accumulation, impossible, and, at worst, there has been a recorded upsurge of anti-Semitism. It would appear that the terms ‘revolutionary’, ‘radical’ and ‘anti-capitalist’ have simply become words used to distinguish oneself from support for the policies of the Labour Party or Obama. The machine of capitalist socialisation therefore appears as strong as ever. In such a situation it seems prescient to return to what was best in the radical movements of the 1960s. The anti-capitalists of this generation were revolting precisely at the time of the height of the Keynesian model and Fordism. Wages had never been higher and the cost of living never lower. In contrast to our own times, however, what characterised these movements, above all, was a critique aimed squarely at capitalist society as a totality. At its best, May ’68 was a revolution driven by a desire to break absolutely with the basic categories of capitalist socialisation and, in so doing, to transform completely every aspect of everyday life for the better. There is much that contemporary generations can learn from this totalising perspective and how it framed the question of emancipation. It is in this context that the work of Raoul Vaneigem should be read today.

This is not to say, however, that the writing of Raoul Vaneigem is not without its problems. On the level of style, Vaneigem rarely provides a clear and systematic presentation of his critical language and ideas. This makes it very difficult at times to follow his line of argument. I think this explains much of the confusion and misunderstanding that surrounds his later writing. The Marxian language of *Traité* was familiar to enough people in the 1960s that it merged well with his visceral and poetic prose style. Although he retains these arguments in his later work, he drops this

more familiar Marxian language in favour of a lexicon that is all his own. However, he never goes out of his way to explain this. It requires a very detailed textual analysis just to find these definitions and to piece together the argument. Obviously, it is up to the reader to meet the demands of the writer, but there is no doubt that even a simple glossary of terms would make his writing far more accessible. It is in large part the fact that books such as *Le Livre des plaisirs* seem hermeneutically sealed to many people that I felt that the theoretical exposition provided in the current work was so necessary.

On the level of theory, the focus of Raoul Vaneigem on the subjective side of the critique of capitalism means that he often avoids developing his insights into its objective structure. Obviously, the subjective is objective in the sense that it reflects a real internalisation of capitalist social forms. However, Vaneigem rarely contextualises this with a critique of the external structures of capitalist civilisation. That is to say, Vaneigem never develops the critique of political economy. Although Vaneigem no doubt has a critique of political economy, it never comes to the forefront of his writing, and, where it does appear, it feels more like assertion than argument. This is a problem because these assumptions are in fact fundamental and have major implications for his critical theory as a whole. They therefore raise a number of important questions.

First, is capitalism essentially defined by class struggle: the battle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat? The critique of value, as represented by Kurz and Jappe, says that this is not the case. Class struggle exists but it is not the essential or defining characteristic of capitalism. Rather, capitalism is the incessant valorisation of value. The endless turning of 100 pounds into 110 pounds. Both the capitalist and the worker are mere agents of value, what Marx terms, the ‘automatic subject’. Within

the capitalist framework, the agency of the worker and the bourgeois is entirely limited by the needs and forms of value. At the same time, capitalism can still function without an owning, exploiting class, by employing managers. Equally, the working class is itself being replaced by technology. Today the mass unemployment that has resulted means that many workers' struggles are actually defined by a battle for the right to be exploited at all. Vaneigem, like Debord and, indeed, Marx, oscillates on this question. On the one hand, he focuses a lot of his critique on the notion of hierarchical domination of one group of subjects over another. On the other hand, he stresses that capitalist society is a form of fetishism in which we all, worker and capitalist alike, sacrifice our concrete needs and desires to the abstract demands of the economy, which essentially escapes our control. This oscillation, as the following question demonstrates, effects how Vaneigem thinks about the problem of human emancipation.

Secondly, does the working class have a special interest in the abolition of capitalism and therefore a privileged position in the development of a radical consciousness to overcome it? The critique of value says not. The working class is just as much an agent of value as the capitalist class. There is nothing about its place as the seller of the labour-power commodity in the cycle of valorisation that gives it any privileged position in the development of a radical consciousness. Most of what has been called 'class struggle', the winning of better wages and conditions for workers, has simply served to further condition human beings into accepting capitalism. Moreover, *every* human being, as a human being, has a real concrete interest in the abolition of capitalism. The cycle of valorisation obeys an abstract fetishistic logic that cares nothing for the concrete realities of human life. The decent into barbarism it has enacted effects everyone, as does the possibility of a final

ecological disaster that could end all human life on the planet. Although, just as the critique of value, he recognises ‘class struggle’ in this sense for what it is, Vaneigem does seem to think that the working class has both a special interest in abolishing capitalism and a privileged position in the development of a radical consciousness. To some extent, however, he, like the rest of the SI, gets around this problem by simply extending the proletarian position to almost everyone. Further, Vaneigem tends in his later work to talk more in terms of a kind of ontological battle between, what he terms, the living and the dead. Yet there is still a tendency in his work towards an attachment to the notion of the industrial working class, in the traditional Marxist sense, as the bearer of a special project of emancipation.

Thirdly, how will capitalism end? The position of Jappe and Kurz is that capitalism will end by meeting an objective and internal limit.⁹¹¹ The technological revolution of the 1970s, micro processing and cybernetics, meant that the amount of labour needed to create the vast majority of commodities was greatly diminished. The total mass of value in capitalist society therefore fell dramatically. It is now increasingly impossible for the economy as a totality to realise new value, which can only be created through the exploitation of labour-power (the same labour-power that is still incessantly being reduced by technological innovation driven by competition). The financialisation of the economy since the 1970s, which is often identified with ‘neo-liberalism’, was the only way of keeping the whole system from collapsing. This is because it keeps the cycle of valorisation occurring on a virtual level by betting on future profits (which can never be realised). As the 2008 financial crisis showed, however, financialisation is only a temporary reprieve. Capitalism is destroying its own categories through an objective process over which no one has any control. It has

⁹¹¹ See, Jappe, *Crédit à mort*, in particular the chapter ‘Crédit à mort’, pp. 95-124.

already reached its internal limits and we are currently living through its slow decline into disaster.

As a member of the SI, Raoul Vaneigem does not put across the idea that capitalism could reach an objective limit. Instead, he banks on the moment wherein the working class will overcome the bourgeoisie in a revolutionary act of conscious will. However, from around the 1990s onwards, Vaneigem states that he does believe in a theory of collapse based on the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.⁹¹² He, like Kurz and Jappe, sees the financialisation of the economy in the 1970s not as a move by greedy bankers but as the only way that capitalist civilisation could have continued at all. The problem, however, is that Vaneigem does not, like Jappe and Kurz, present a reasoned argument for this claim and it therefore appears as a mere assertion. Indeed, despite its importance, the small amount of space that he gives to this position in his work, a few lines here and there, makes it easy to miss that he states it at all. Moreover, although Vaneigem does say that neo-liberalism was the only way to save capital, he also occasionally employs a rhetoric of greed that would enter into a rather different kind of discourse. Once again, this seems to be the result of his oscillation over whether capitalism is fundamentally defined by its fetishistic logic or by domination by actual capitalist subjects.

Fourthly, and finally, when capitalism collapses does the current alienation of capitalist subjects make it more or less likely that we can found a new, more human civilisation, or will we descend into barbarism? According to the critique of value, the current state of capitalist subjects makes barbarism and, indeed, the end of humanity through environmental disaster a real possibility. The ability of human beings to empathise and to respond to reality has been completely undermined by the cult of

⁹¹² See, 'Observations sur le *Manifeste*', op. cit.

competition, immediate gratification and individualism encouraged by the market. When revolutions such as the Paris Commune of 1871 or the Spanish Revolution of the 1930s occurred, these were still based in communities that had some sense of pre-capitalist solidarity. The critique of value is therefore pessimistic but hopeful. It's pessimism, however, allows it to stress the extreme and real danger that humanity is currently facing. In contrast, Raoul Vaneigem appears to be overly optimistic about the state of the human psyche in the face of this collapse. While he does briefly refer to the end of humanity as a possibility, his rhetorical emphasis is on an almost entirely positive and inevitable outcome. This means that, unlike theorists such as Jappe, Vaneigem fails to stress the seriousness of the situation. At the same time, however, both theorists realise that the important thing to do before the collapse is to encourage human ideas, a critique of barbarism, that will denaturalise us to the categories of capitalist social life. Despite his failure to engage properly with the critique of political economy, I think Vaneigem perhaps goes further in some respects than the critique of value in identifying and struggling against the interiorisation of this inhumanity promoted by capitalist society. When capitalism does collapse, which it will, we could do much worse than look to Vaneigem's vision of a new civilisation founded on a practice of pleasure to replace it.

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‘Anselme Bellegarigue (XIXe s.)’

‘Aryens’
‘Michel de Bay dit Baïus (1513-1589)’
‘Béguines & Bégards’
‘Bloemardinne (morte en 1335)’
‘Bruno Bauer (1809-1882)’
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‘Denck Johannes ou Hans Couvade (1500-1527)’
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 ‘Max Adler (1873-1937)’
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 ‘Nicolai Hartmann (1882-1950)’
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