

The Demand for Human Rights is a Revolutionary Act

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a review of

A Declaration of the Rights of Human Beings: On the Sovereignty of Life as Surpassing the Rights of Man, Second Edition by Raoul Vaneigem, Translated by Liz Heron. PM Press, 2019

“The freedom to live like a human being annuls the supposed freedoms of commerce and predation.”

So begins Raoul Vaneigem’s preface to the second edition of *A Declaration of the Rights of Human Beings*. Originally published in 2001, this second edition is his attempt to create a foundational document asserting the primacy of humanity against the dominance of commerce and state power.

Vaneigem, the Belgian historian and philosopher, was once a key member of the Situationist International which exerted significant influence on the enragés of 1968 France, but he has continued to impact anti-authoritarian thought and resistance ever since, including the Occupy movement.

His writing is poetical and polemical, always original, brilliant and provocative, with an emphasis on daily life and our subjective experience.

Vaneigem argues that the global market economy, which has shaped our existence and social relations, is in a process of decline. This, in spite of re-energizing changes to capitalism, like the move towards natural energy. He has no interest in the solutions of politicians which will maintain an oppressive and predatory system based on the exploitation of humans and nature.

He promotes civil disobedience that, in the stead of a market system, can move us towards continually evolving, self-managed communities run by direct democracy, that create local, environmentally responsible solutions for health, energy, transport, and learning, while engaging in the self-production of goods rather than the purchase of commodities. These represent the triumph of life, poetry, and pleasure over an existence based on mere survival in a market economy.

A Declaration of the Rights begins with a critique of various historical bills of rights, but Vaneigem principally focuses on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) from the French Revolution. This was a secular document asserting the natural rights of individual male property owners. Among other things, its seventeen articles proclaimed their rights to property ownership, political participation and popular sovereignty, freedom of speech, religious freedom, equality under the law, and liberty. In 1791, Olympe De Gouges published the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* in response to the patriarchal nature of the document.

Vaneigem argues that the Rights of Man were a rebuttal of monarchical power and divine right, serfdom, and an agrarian economy run by aristocracy; but while these were significant changes and contributed to ensuring a basic level of subsistence, the Rights of Man conceived of man in an abstract way, as a worker and citizen, without recognition of his humanity.

As such, the Rights of Man, and the free circulation of ideas became as one with the expansion of free trade and a new dominant economy. The Rights of Man protected property ownership, so helped to maintain inequality.

They solidified the power of the state. And, their legal protections primarily protected people's right to continue to labour.

The Rights of Man are linked to an economy which maintains people in a new form of slavery. Vaneigem writes: "The Rights of Man are no more than amplifications of a single right which is the right to survive merely for the sake of working toward the survival of a totalitarian economy."

This economic dominance quashes human freedoms while promoting an ideology of consumerism. Other effects of this are the rapid depletion of the corporately controlled natural world, a perilous future for the planet, and increasing poverty and state terrorism.

As an alternative to the Rights of Man, based on our shared humanity, Vaneigem presents 58 rights with accompanying commentaries. Each is bold and provocative.

He sums up his intentions for his Declaration with what may first seem to be an aggrandizing statement, but which is actually a pretty fair summary of the breadth of what follows. "The present Declaration of the Rights of Human Beings attempts, taking self-creation and world-creation as its foundation, to further a radical break with the ways of thinking, psychological responses, social habits and customs, and individual and collective behaviour, that have defined men, women and children at a deep subconscious level for nearly ten millennia."

Among the rights are the following:

Article 10b [iii]

All human beings have the right to replace State governments with a world federation of small local communities where individual excellence will ensure the humanity of social life

This is not a political book in any traditional sense, although there are rights which speak to typical political considerations. Humans, he asserts, for example, have the right to free transport and free healthcare.

We can easily glimpse the sort of future society that he sees as possible and necessary, but without this being an attempt to direct a Utopian picture (which would be inconsistent with the rights to self-determination and creativity that he delineates) or provide a tactical playbook for how to get from here to there.

Article 5

All humans have the right to happiness.

While the rights in the *Declaration* include some that are similar to those asserted in past documents, their implications are made explicit here. The right to happiness, for one, entails the right to "the creation of one's own destiny and the re-creation of the world in order to take pleasure in it." Rights to our humanity give us the right to radically restructure our society in ways that cease to undermine it.

Article 1

All humans have the right to become human and to be treated as such.

Vaneigem is not engaged in simply describing humans in novel economic or political terms consistent with his own political views. Instead, he is asserting the right of humans to their full humanity. Humans have rights to all aspects of their being. They are corporeal beings, part of nature, their bodies being broken down by work, medicine, pollution, and from being viewed as a machine.

As such, we have the right to healthy, natural food, and a life freed from the demands of consumerism and wage labour. But humans are much more than simply biological entities. We are beings with consciousness, emotions, intellect, and creativity. And, we are deeply social creatures.

We have rights to all of these aspects of our humanity. Rights to think or not, to feel a range of emotions and to express them or not, to be kind and to manage our moods, and to interact or not with others.

Ultimately, Vaneigem is advocating for living rather than surviving, and for unity between personal life, collective life, and the environment.

But he is also arguing that complete human fulfillment gives us rights to poetry, play, to self-creation and adornment, to dreaming, to innocence, to anger, and to making real our desires.

Rod Dubey's latest book is *The Lingering Longing For A Long Lost Love*, an ontological mystery set in post WWII America, based on 60 old photographs and other lies.



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