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Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International

T. J. CLARK AND DONALD NICHOLSON-SMITH

What does it matter to us what judgments may later be passed upon our obscure personalities? If we have seen fit to record the political differences that exist between the majority of the Commune and ourselves, this is not in order to apportion blame to the former and praise to the latter. It is simply to ensure that, should the Commune be defeated, people will know that it was not what it has appeared to be up to now.

—Gustave Lefrançais addressing constituents, May 20, 1871¹

No sooner were Guy Debord's ashes safely cast from the Pointe du Vert-Galant into the Seine, no sooner had death quelled his remorseless tendency to respond to everyone who made the least mention of him, than an emboldened pack of commentators bounded from their kennels, all desperately eager to position themselves, pro, con, or otherwise with respect to Debord's person, writings, and *faits et gestes*.

A case in point is the intrepid dabbler Régis Debray, sometime focal point of Guevarism, sometime advisor to President Mitterand. Debray, who by his own (wholly unreliable) account had never before engaged with Debord in any way, now felt an urgent need to denounce Debord's ideas, and specifically the concept of the spectacle, for their supposed idealism, for their young-Marxism and young-Hegelianism, for their unreconstructed Feuerbachianism—but most of all for their strict incompatibility with Debray's own positivist sociology of mass communications, which goes by the name of "mediology."²

Sometimes modestly described as a small thing (Debray is prone to talking about "notre petite médiologie"), this would-be new discipline has high ambitions. It pretends to the throne of semiology, no less—even though, to use Debray-speak, "semio" had a good half-decade's start on 'medio'." But Debray also needs to keep his neo-empiricist baby away from the very slightest taint of totalizing or negative

1. Cited in *Internationale situationniste* 12 (September 1969), p. 23.

2. Régis Debray, "A Propos du spectacle: Réponse à un jeune chercheur," *Le Débat* 85 (May–August 1995).

thought, and this is where Debord's global condemnation of the spectacle comes in handy: "For the Situationists . . . mediation is evil. For us, mediation is not only a necessity, it is civilization itself. For us man is man solely by virtue of technological mediation, and he needs the spectacle to gain access to his truth. It is via illusion that man discovers his reality. [etc., etc.]"³

We were members of the Situationist International in 1966–67. This gives us no special vantage point with respect to the really interesting questions about the S.I. in its final, extraordinary years. In particular the key issue, of how and why the Situationists came to have a preponderant role in May 1968—that is, how and why their brand of politics participated in, and to an extent fueled, a crisis of the late-capitalist State—is still wide open to interpretation. (And, for that matter, to simple factual inquiry. The scoffing and evasion and doctoring of the evidence about May 1968 shows no sign of letting up.) We shall get to some of these subjects in a moment. But we make no apology for starting from the bottom. Debray's maunderings are typical. And in a sense necessary. The efforts of organized knowledge to discredit the Situationists—to pin on them a final dismissive label and have them be part of "infantile Leftism" or "the politics of authenticity" or "the 1960s" or some such accredited pseudo-phenomenon—are at once entirely sensible (organized knowledge is at least good at identifying its real enemies) and wonderfully self-defeating. For some reason the S.I. will not go away.

All the same, one might well ask why we are responding to *this particular* piece of nonsense. Perhaps the Debray piece was irksome because it really did manage to plumb new depths, even in such a hotly contested field. Certainly we never expect to see it bettered for oily chat-show authoritativeness plus bare-faced amnesia about the writer's own part in the period and debates referred to; not to mention the more or less lunatic (but of course calculated) "esteem" that Debray ends by confessing for Debord "as an individual"—and as that rarity, "a professional moralist" who actually had "a personal moral code."

But there was something else, we realize, that got under our skin. It so happened that the British journal *New Left*⁴ *Review* chose to publish a (somewhat

3. Régis Debray, interview with Nicolas Weill, *Le Monde*, July 19, 1996.

4. The word "Left" recurs in what follows, and inevitably its meaning shifts. Much of the time it is used descriptively, and therefore pessimistically, to indicate a set of interlocking ideological directorships stretching roughly from the Statist and workerist fringes of Social Democracy and Labourism to the para-academic journals and think tanks of latter-day Trotskyism, taking in the Stalinist and lightly post-Stalinist center along the way. But of course there would be no point in using this description if we did not think it still worth doing so in the name of, and hopefully for the benefit of, another Left altogether (we ask the indulgence of those, and they are many, who reject the term "Left" as irrevocably compromised). This is a Left whose struggles with the late-capitalist State are at present local and multiform ("identity" and "ecological" politics being merely those forms that the spectacle chooses for now to (mis)represent—and many others will surely be given the same cynical treatment in years to come); a Left, however, that increasingly senses the enormity of its enemy and begins to think the problem of contesting that enemy in terms not borrowed from Marxist-Leninism or its official Opposition; a Left whose insubordination is the theme of endless jeremiads from the "actually existing" Left, whose dismal battle cry—to unite and fight under the same old phony-communitarian banners—it persists in ignoring.



Moscow, 1917. Toppled Alexander III.

abbreviated) version of Debray's eulogy in its issue for November/December 1995.⁵ This was only the second time in the *Review's* history that it had addressed—and misrepresented—the question of the Situationists (the first, of which more in a moment, came in 1989, after a quarter-century of eloquent silence⁶). But contradictions will out, and as luck (or bad management) would have it, the Debray piece was placed in nice juxtaposition to lengthy and reverential discussions, in the same issue, of Eric Hobsbawm's "history of the short twentieth century"—his "report," as one wag put it, "to a Central Committee that just isn't there any more." The very idea of pressing too hard on Hobsbawm's omissions and excuses as a historian was denounced *a priori* by *NLR* as "anti-Communist." One law for young-Hegelians, it seems, and another for unrepentant Stalinists. To have been over-optimistic about the revolutionary potential of the Watts proletariat is one thing; to have spent one's life inventing reasons for forced collectivization, show trials, the Great Terror, the suppression of the East German and Hungarian uprisings, and so on *ad nauseam*, quite

5. "Remarks on the Spectacle," *New Left Review* 214.

6. Peter Wollen, "The Situationist International," *New Left Review* 174 (March/April 1989). Versions of this article then appeared in *An Endless Adventure . . . An Endless Passion . . . An Endless Banquet. A Situationist Scrapbook*, ed. Iwona Blaswick (London and New York: ICA/Verso, 1989), and *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957–1972*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1989). The publications accompanied a traveling exhibition designed to illustrate Wollen's thesis.

another. The former is the ranting of primitive rebels, the latter the hard analytic choices of Marxist history.

Naturally this steered our thoughts back to the *NLR*'s earlier effort to invent a history of "Situationism" that would somehow avoid dealing with the moment, in the last years of the 1960s, when forms of Situationist-influenced politics actually confronted the journal's own so-called "mainstream" or "classical" Marxism. Mighty was the labor of *NLR*'s writer on art matters, Peter Wollen, when he was finally called in for the issue of March–April 1989; and many were the main currents and imaginative genealogies and thumbnail sketches of this important -Ism and that: all in order to buttress the *essential* declaration, on the last page but one of his *Shorter and Shorter Twentieth Century*, that from 1962 onward in the work of the S.I., "The denial by Debord and his supporters of any separation between artistic and political activity . . . led in effect not to a new unity within Situationist practice but to a total elimination of art except in propagandist and agitational forms. . . . Theory displaced art as the vanguard activity, and politics (for those who wished to retain absolutely clean hands) was postponed till the day when it would be placed on the agenda by the spontaneous revolt of those who executed rather than gave orders."⁷ Again the Michael Ignatieff authoritativeness is breathtaking. It so happens we remember Wollen in 1968, not yet having transferred his affections from Trotskyite center to avant-garde periphery, making the

7. Wollen, "Situationist International," p. 94.



Petrograd, 1918. Dedication of a statue of Heinrich Heine (stage center: Lunacharsky).

rounds of the main sites/sights of “student revolution” in Britain as a kind of New Left observer, and recoiling in horror from the ideological impurities he discovered there—of course reserving his full Jonathan Edwards for “those damned Situationists, the lowest of the low!” That remark we recall specifically (we wore such verdicts as a badge of honor).

Far be it from us to suggest that this makes Wollen an unreliable guide to the same scene after twenty years’ reflection. Age brings wisdom, even repentance. But it means he has—how shall we say?—an interesting perspective on the events he has chosen to narrate.

*

Enough, enough. In the end the interest of the Debray/*NLR* proceedings lies in the way they reveal, just a little more flagrantly than usual, the structure (and function) of what now passes for knowledge of the S.I. from 1960 on. The established wisdom, let us call it. It can be broken down into four essential propositions, though obviously these overlap and repeat themselves.

Proposition 1: The Situationist International was an art organization (a typical late-modernist avant-garde) that strayed belatedly into “art politics.” Judged as art, its politics do not amount to much. And surely they are not meant to be judged as politics!

Proposition 2: The S.I. in its last ten years was an art-political sect, consumed with the lineaments of its own purity, living on a diet of exclusions and denunciations, and largely ignoring the wider political realm, or the problems of organization and expansion that presented themselves in an apparently prerevolutionary situation. Call this the clean-hands thesis. Or the burning-with-the-pure-flame-of-negativity thesis. (Proposition 2 is subscribed to, be it said, by many of the S.I.’s admirers.)

Proposition 3: Situationist politics was “subjectivist,” post- or hyper-Surrealist, propelled by a utopian notion of a new “politics of everyday life” that can be reduced to a handful of ’68 graffiti: “Take your desires for reality,” “Boredom is always counter-revolutionary,” etc.

Proposition 4: Situationist theory, especially as represented by Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, is hopelessly young-Hegelian—rhetorical, totalizing, resting on a metaphysical hostility to “mere” appearance or representation, and mounting a last-ditch defense of the notion of authenticity, whether of individual or class subject.

Like all good travesties, these four propositions are not simply lies. All of them point to real problems in the work of the Situationists after 1960, and the last thing we want to do is suggest those problems did not exist. What we do think, however, is that each of the propositions is a flimsy half-truth, never properly argued by Left opinion-makers, and contradicted by a body of evidence with which these opinion-makers are intimately acquainted but which they choose not to mention. The reason is not far to seek. Each proposition has a barely hidden corollary, and it is the truth of the corollary that this Left wants (and needs) to affirm.

Corollary 1: Therefore, the bone-hard philistinism of the Left in the 1960s and after—the fact that it called on the likes of Peter Fuller, *Tel Quel*, Roger Garaudy, John Berger, Ernst Fischer, etc.,⁸ as guides to the new regimes of representation then being ushered in—did not and does not matter.

Corollary 2: Therefore, the failure of the established Left to pose the problems of revolutionary organization again, and come to terms with the disaster of its Leninist and Trotskyite past, likewise does not matter. Such things are distractions. Dirty hands make light work. And the Left's love affairs with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,⁹ or the *foci* of Che Guevara and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, or the Burmese road to Socialism, or the Italian Communist Party, or Tony Benn and Tom Hayden—or a hundred other objects that left the Situationists cold for reasons stated by them in detail at the time—are now so much water under the bridge. *Jedermann sein eigner Fussball*, apparently. The Left may have prostrated itself in front of Mao's starving and stage-managed utopia. But at least it was not fooled by black uprisings in the United States. So many misled, premature lumpens,

8. The reader is invited to supply other names. We had a hard job thinking of any.

9. On 17 May 1968 the Sorbonne Occupation Committee, in which the Situationists were then still the majority, cabled the Chinese Communist Party as follows: "TREMBLE BUREAUCRATS STOP [etc.] LONG LIVE THE GREAT CHINESE PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION OF 1927 BETRAYED BY THE STALINIST BUREAUCRATS STOP LONG LIVE THE PROLETARIANS OF CANTON AND ELSEWHERE WHO HAVE TAKEN UP ARMS AGAINST THE SO-CALLED PEOPLE'S ARMY STOP LONG LIVE THOSE CHINESE WORKERS AND STUDENTS WHO HAVE ATTACKED THE SO-CALLED CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND THE BUREAUCRATIC MAOIST REGIME STOP LONG LIVE REVOLUTIONARY MARXISM STOP DOWN WITH THE STATE STOP COMITÉ D'OCCUPATION DE LA SORBONNE AUTONOME ET POPULAIRE." Contrast this communication with the fact that for a full decade after 1968 a large portion of the Left continued to flounder about in myriad versions of Maoism. The consensus of the French Left intelligentsia and its *vedettariat* (naming names would, we assume, be superfluous for readers of *October*) was almost iron-clad in this regard—a state of affairs it is now strictly forbidden to recall. At the time, incidentally, one of the few opposing voices raised against the Parisian Mao-cult was that of the former Situationist René Viénet.

lacking (the Left's) direction, unaware that the time was not ripe for insurrection (for these guys it never is or will be). "Spontaneity"! The very word brings on a shudder or a giggle.

Corollary 3: Therefore, the grounds of Left theory and practice need not shift. The regime of policy-studies-plus-theory-refereeing needs no renewal to speak of. Raising the problem of the social construction of "subjects" in late capitalism, and possible forms of resistance to such construction, and above all exploring the implications of the invasion and restructuring of whole realms of representation that had once been left largely outside the commodity regime—the set of issues the Situationists broached under the rubric "the colonization of everyday life"—all of this leads in the wrong direction. It leads to "identity politics," which every good 1960s survivor is supposed to blame for the demise of the Left.

Corollary 4: Therefore, the Left's infatuation with the wildest and most dubious forms of anti-Hegelianism—semiotic Maoism, PCF paranoid not-the-subject-but-the-Party-ism, uninhabited universes made up of apparatuses, instances, structures, subcultural tics, and *systèmes de la mode*, weightless skepticisms and eternal battlings with the ghostly specters of "empiricism" and "scientism"—is entirely valid, and has nothing to do with the Left's being listened to these days, on matters of theory, by no one who is not a subscriber to *Representations* or *Diacritics* or *Modern Language Notes*.

You will notice that the hidden corollaries have a lot more substance than the original arguments about the S.I. And that is appropriate. The arguments are ridiculously thin. It is the corollaries that count. It would be tedious, then, to go point by point through the cheery misrepresentations and present the evidence for their untruth. Better to take one or two topics at random, and convey the general flavor.

*

Who would ever have thought, for a start, that the S.I. as pictured by the established wisdom had time, in the intervals between exclusions and anathemata, for analyses of political events in the world outside? For example, the series of interventions in the evolving situation in Algeria, at the time of Ben Bella and Boumedienne, culminating in the long article "Les Luttes de classes en Algérie" (published in the Situationist journal for March 1966, and then as a wall poster). Or the pamphlet of August 1967 on Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, "Le Point d'explosion de l'idéologie en Chine" (reprinted in the journal later



Budapest, October 23, 1956. Toppled Stalin.

that year). We are obviously biased judges, but we persist in thinking that these texts are classics of Marxist analysis. (In both cases the S.I. benefited from having members who possessed real knowledge of the language and history of the countries concerned, as opposed to forming opinions from books by fellow-travelers and editorials in *Le Monde*.) We wonder if those who now dismiss the “political” S.I. could come up with commentaries on the same or comparable subjects from the same period that strike them, in retrospect, as even roughly as good. Good meaning disabused and passionate.

Then there is the question of Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*. Again, a few topics at random. The book was published in November 1967. It was written, that is, at the same time as the political analyses we have just mentioned (along with various others published in the S.I. journal or as pamphlets: on Watts and the commodity economy, on the Six Day War and the Middle East, on the first peculiar stirrings of “youth revolt,” and so on), and it was clearly meant to be read alongside those analyses.¹⁰ It is very much more a “political” book than you would ever dream from reading most accounts of it by detractors or enthusiasts. How would anyone suspect, from Debray’s account and many others like it, that by far the book’s longest chapter is entitled “The Proletariat as Subject and Representation,” and that this hinge of the overall argument turns (once again)

10. Most of these texts can be found in English translation in Ken Knabb’s *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981).

on the question of Leninism, the Party, and the history of the working-class movement? Of course our question is *faux naïf*. This aspect of *The Society of the Spectacle* must not be talked about. Either because it would pull commentators back from the dreamworld of simulacra they wish to believe Debord inhabited or predicted, or because arguing with it would involve remembering one's own "positions," then and now.

Let us concede one or two points. Of course *The Society of the Spectacle* was conceived as a work of "high theory," and depends on a dialogue with texts, mostly drawn from the deep past of Marxism, German philosophy, and French classical literature, which it finds a way to ventriloquize and exacerbate. (Debray's suggestion that the book "admits to plagiarism only in extremis"—in a single thesis toward the end—is pure bad faith. Quite apart from the fact that Debray knows perfectly well, as everyone does, that at that moment Debord is quoting Lautréamont on plagiarism, *The Society of the Spectacle* voices its dependence on the past in every paragraph. That dependence is far deeper and weirder than a speed-reader like Debray has time to bother with.) The question to ask is what might have been the strategic point of such a way of writing in 1967. Dates matter. Althusser's *For Marx* and *Reading "Capital"* were two years old, and sweeping the Left in Europe. When Debray says airily that "we were all Feuerbachians in our



Vilnius, August 30, 1991. *Toppled Lenin.*
Courtesy AP/Wide World Photos.

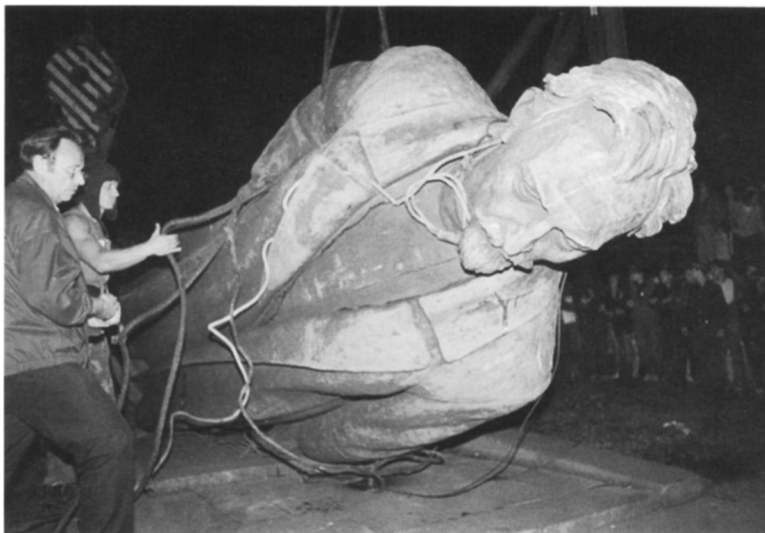
youth, all great enthusiasts for the young Marx,” the little confession conjures away what “we” all became a few years later.¹¹

What Debray produced in 1967, the year the Debord book appeared, was *Revolution in the Revolution*, which does for Fidel Castro what Sidney and Beatrice Webb did for Stalin. Fashions in cybernetics and hard-line structuralism had then just promoted (or given new prominence to) the discipline of semiotics. This was the moment, in other words, when the very word “totality,” and the very idea of trying to articulate those forces and relations of production which were giving capitalism a newly unified and unifying form, were tabooed (as they largely still are) as remnants of a discredited “Hegelian” tradition.¹² These things were on Debord’s mind. One of us remembers him at the Collège de France in 1966, sitting in on Hyppolite’s course on Hegel’s *Logic*, and having to endure a final session at which the master invited two young Turks to give papers. “Trois étapes de la dégénérescence de la culture bourgeoise française,” said Debord as the last speaker sat down. “Premièrement, l’érudition classique”—he had in mind Hyppolite himself, who had spoken briefly at the start of things—“quand même basé sur une certaine connaissance générale. Ensuite le petit con stalinien, avec ses mots de passe, ‘Travail,’ ‘Force’ et ‘Terreur.’ Et enfin—dernière bassesse—le sémiologue.” In other words, *The Society of the Spectacle* was conceived and written specifically as a book for bad times. It was intended to keep the habit of totalization alive—but of course to express, in every detail of its verbal texture and overall structure, what a labor of rediscovery and revoicing (indeed, of restating the obvious) that project would now involve.

The obvious it has to be, then, once again—since there is such a determination not to face it. For the Situationists, the overwhelming reality was Stalinism: the damage and horror it had given rise to, and its capacity to reproduce itself, in ever

11. Not that the “we” became just one thing. Debray’s own sinuous trajectory is not our concern here; the curious (if they exist) may trace it through his voluminous autobiographical writings, or take a look at his *Media Manifestoes*, recently published in English translation (London and New York: Verso, 1996). But a shared need to avoid the hard core of Debord makes strange bedfellows. Thus Philippe Sollers’s recent discovery that Debord’s work is “one of the greatest of the century,” that Debord is “un classique parmi les classiques,” etc. (see, for example, *Libération*, December 6, 1994, p. 34), is ridiculed by Debray as so much “brandishing of the mystical corpse” and “psalmodizing of pale *détournements* into dazzling inventions” (*Le Débat*, art. cit., p. 6). What all this dueling hyperbole papers over is that both Debray and Sollers, the one disparagingly, the other admiringly, want above all to imprison Debord’s negativity in an ivory tower. As an antidote to Debray and Sollers, see Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (Pescara: Edizioni Tracce, 1993); French (and revised) edition, translated by Claude Galli: *Guy Debord* (Marseilles: Via Valeriana, 1995)—a straightforward, honest, and non-hagiographical study.

12. No one is pretending that the effort at totalization in Debord is risk-free; still less that his example should point us back to some ludicrous Hegel revival. But it is time to retire the claim that “the pursuit of totality” necessarily equals “undifferentiation,” “organic unity,” “refusal of specificity and autonomy,” etc. A good first step would be to reread the analytic sections of *The Philosophy of Right*, and then contrast Hegel’s account of the constitution (and contradictions) of social identities with, say, those little myths of absence and difference—generalized from a pseudo-psychology to any and every scale and social circumstance—which are all the Left currently has to offer an “identity politics” in search of a theory and practice.



Moscow, KGB headquarters, August 22, 1991.
Toppled Dzerzhinsky. Courtesy Reuters/Bettmann.

newer and technically more plausible forms, within a Left that had never faced its own complicity or infection. (We shall never begin to understand Debord's hostility to the concept "representation," for instance, unless we realize that for him the word always carried a Leninist aftertaste. The spectacle is repugnant because it threatens to generalize, as it were, the Party's claim to be the representative of the working class.) *The Society of the Spectacle's* forced conversation with the early Marx, and with the shades of Feuerbach and Hegel, is an answer to this situation. "Forced" in two senses: it is ostentatious and obviously pushed to excess (so that even Debray cannot miss it); and these qualities are precisely the signs of the tactic being a tactic, forced on the writer by the history—the disaster—he is recounting.

We are not saying the book does not suffer from the strategy it thinks it has to adopt. Of course it does. But we are saying that the strategy made possible a kind of sanity—inseparable from the book's overweening hubris, its determination to think world-historically in the teeth of specialists from Left and Right—which could be purchased no other way. And we are saying that to choose not to recognize what other modes of Left discourse *The Society of the Spectacle* was launched *against* is to continue the very habits of amnesia and duplicity that the book had full in its sights.

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Lastly, and perhaps centrally, a word on the question of organization. That the S.I. in the 1960s was a small group is true. That its policy of aiming for con-

stant agreement on key matters, and fighting against the reproduction of hierarchy and ideological freezing within the group, led to repeated splits and exclusions, ditto. We parted company with the Situationists in 1967 on just these questions, as applied to the S.I.'s actions in Britain and the U.S. We are not likely, therefore, to think the Situationists always got these things right. All the same, what we find nauseating in the received account is the implication that concern for problems of internal organization—above all a determination to find a way out of the legacy of “democratic centralism”—is one more token of these art-politicians’ lack of seriousness. Anyone who actually reads what the S.I. wrote in 1966 and 1967 will quickly realize that it could not have issued from a group of people walled into their own factional struggles. There were such struggles. They were thought (sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly, in our view) to be the necessary condition of the kind of revolutionary clarity that informs the best of Situationist writing. But the Situationists never got stuck in their own turmoil, and they went on thinking, especially as things heated up in the course of 1967, about how they were to act—to “expand”—if the capitalist State offered them an opportunity. Here, for instance, are extracts from a working document entitled “Réponse aux camarades de Rennes—sur l’organisation et l’autonomie.” Signed by Debord, Khayati, and Viénet, and dated July 16, 1967, this text came out of a series of discussions (and joint actions) with other small groups on the Left.

The discussion begun on July 3 between us and the comrades of two groups affiliated with the Internationale Anarchiste seems to us to have revealed the existence—alongside our agreement on the essential, and indeed as the outcome of that very agreement—of divergent views on the question of organization. . . . These divergences may be summed up as follows: Whereas we are definitely in favor of a *proliferation of autonomous revolutionary organizations*, Loïc Le Reste [of the Rennes group] thinks far more in terms of a *fusion* of such groups. This is not to say, of course, that Le Reste ultimately favors a single revolutionary organization claiming to “represent” either a class or the revolutionary movement as a whole; nor do we for our part have some kind of formal attachment to artificial distinctions between groups that rightly recognize their own fundamental unity on the main theoretical and practical issues.

The question does not therefore turn on some abstract definition of an absolute organizational model, but rather on a critical examination of present conditions, and on particular choices regarding the prospects for real action.

. . . It is well known that the S.I. has never “recruited” members, though it is always willing to welcome individuals on an ad hoc basis; and both aspects of this policy have been determined by the concrete



Paris, Place Clichy, March 10, 1969. Anarcho-Situationist “commandos” installing a replica of Charles Fourier’s statue on a plinth left empty since the removal of the original by the Nazis.¹³

conditions which in our view have circumscribed our practical activity—that activity conceived as means and ends, inseparably—and thus the issue does not depend merely on an individual’s capacity to understand, or willingness to espouse, particular theoretical positions. (As for the theoretical positions themselves, we naturally hope that all who are able, in the full sense of the term, to *appropriate* them, will make free use of what they appropriate.) Very schematically, we may say that the S.I. considers that what it can do at present is work, on an international level, for the reappearance of certain basic elements of a modern-day revolutionary critique. The activity of the S.I. is a *moment* which we do not mistake for a *goal*: the workers must organize themselves, they will achieve emancipation through their own efforts, etc. . . . We cannot accept the idea that numerical “reinforcement” is a virtue per se. It can be harmful from an internal point of view, if it produces an imbalance between what we really have to do and a membership which can serve those ends only in an abstract way, and which is thus subordinate, whether for geographical or other reasons. It can be harmful from an external point of view, to the extent that it presents another example of the Will to Pseudo-Power, after the

13. See *Internationale situationniste* 12 (September 1969), pp. 97–98.

fashion of those many Trotskyite small groups possessed of a “ruling party vocation.” . . .

Even more strongly, we disagree with Loïc Le Reste when he argues that the autonomy of different organizations can introduce a *hierarchy* among them. On the contrary, we think that hierarchy threatens to appear within an organization as soon as some of its members can be constrained to approve and execute what the organization decides, while possessing less power than other members to affect the decision. But we do not see how an effectively autonomous organization—and of course one that has rejected any notion of double allegiance—could become subordinate to an outside power. *L'Unique et sa propriété*¹⁴ charges that “Whenever the S.I. affects to debate theoretical issues with various other revolutionary organizations . . . things always degenerate into bureaucratic farce, in which judgment is passed on these movements and their programs from the lofty and abstract point of view of a disembodied radicalism.” But it is only if the kind of relationship in question was really bureaucratic—that is, aiming at *subordination*—or if our root-and-branch radicalism was indeed abstract and disembodied (which remains to be proven . . .) that one could legitimately talk of the S.I. seeking a *superior role*—in the first case practically, in the second as empty wish-fulfilment. Anyway, what kind of revolutionary organization, composed of what kind of idiots, would actually *let itself* be subordinated in such a way? . . .

As for the possibility of fusions in the future, we believe that they will best take place at revolutionary moments, when the workers’ movement is further advanced. . . .

We do not claim to have the secret formula that will solve the organizational problem of the period ahead. In any case, this question can be neither raised nor resolved entirely within the context of today’s small radical groups. We (and some others) are sure only of a few basic principles: for instance, the necessity of not following old models, without, however, falling back into the pseudo-innocence of purely informal relationships. These principles are our starting point; and without question one of them is respect for the autonomy of the many groups that are worth talking to, and a determination to go on talking to them in good faith.

This is a working document, as we said, unremarkable in itself, and never published subsequently. To a large extent, its approach to the problems of political organization was overtaken by the events of 1968. (Though of course the text is

14. A pamphlet published in 1967 by a group of recent S.I. excludées known as the “Garnautins.”

haunted by a premonition of those events. And to say, as Wollen does, that the May revolution “duly came to the surprise of the Situationists as much as anyone else”¹⁵ is pure face-saving on “anyone else”’s part. Except that the section of the Left Wollen belonged to was not so much surprised as horrified. Events refused to follow the required neo-Gramscian script.)

We cite the “Réponse aux camarades de Rennes” because its contents contradict the current travesty-history of the S.I. during this period, and not least that travesty-history’s favorite *political* claim—that the Situationists were simply “council communists” whose only answer to the practical questions of revolutionary politics was to hypostatize past experiments with workers’ councils as a way of solving all problems of organization in advance. Again, this charge is not simply empty. The invocation of Kiel and Barcelona could be, at times, a kind of mantra. But in practice the invocation coexisted with a whole range of actions and negotiations that aimed to throw the issue of organization back into the melting pot. And consider the invocation itself! Of course any revolutionary practice has to learn from the past, and no doubt idealize that past in doing so. But better an idealized image of 1918 and 1936 than of the years, and kinds of power, that most of the Left put on a pedestal.

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We realize that by concentrating on the issues we have selected from the Situationists’ final years we run the danger of seeming to fall in with the established notion of some form of epistemological (and practical) break in the S.I.’s history, taking place in the early 1960s, by which “art” gave way to “politics.” It is a crude model, shedding about as much useful light on the difference between “early” and “late” Situationists as Althusser’s does on “early” and “late” Marx. All of the activity we have mentioned was conceived as an aspect of a practice in which “art”—meaning those possibilities of representational and antirepresentational action thrown up by fifty years of modernist experiment on the borders of the category—might now be realized. This was the truly utopian dimension of S.I. activity. And it could and did become a horizon of possibility that meant too little in practice. But only at moments. Surely the remarkable thing, which it now takes a massive effort of historical imagination to recapture, is how active—how instrumental—this utopian dimension was in what the Situationists actually did. It was the “art” dimension, to put it crudely—the continual pressure put on the question of representational forms in politics and everyday life, and the refusal to foreclose on the issue of representation versus agency—that made their politics the deadly weapon it was for a while. And gave them the role they

15. Wollen, “Situationist International,” p. 94.

had in May 1968. This is the aspect of the 1960s that the official Left wants most of all to forget.

Inevitably, we have focused here on the S.I. and the Left. It was the Left (as opposed to, say, the art world) that the Situationists most hated in the 1960s and thought worth targeting. Whether the Left is still worth targeting we are not sure. We have tried several times to write a conclusion to these pages that did so, and have come up hard against the emptiness of the present. As usual, Debord is the best guide to this state of affairs. “Long ago,” he says in his 1992 preface to *The Society of the Spectacle*,

Thesis 58 had established as axiomatic that “The spectacle has its roots in the fertile field of the economy, and it is the produce of this field which must in the end come to dominate the spectacular market.”

This striving of the spectacle toward modernization and unification, together with all the other tendencies toward the simplification of society, was what in 1989 led the Russian bureaucracy suddenly, and as one man, to convert to the current *ideology* of democracy—in other words, to the dictatorial freedom of the Market, as tempered by the recognition of the rights of Homo Spectator. No one in the West felt the need to spend more than a single day considering the import and impact of this extraordinary media event—proof enough, were proof called for, of the progress made by the techniques of the spectacle. All that needed recording was the fact that a sort of geological tremor had apparently taken place. The phenomenon was duly noted, dated, and deemed sufficiently well understood; a very simple sign, “the fall of the Berlin Wall,” repeated over and over again, immediately attained the incontestability of all the other *signs of democracy*.¹⁶

The “very simple sign” still rules. It does so for all kinds of reasons, including the utter failure of the Left to face what the sign might mean for *it*—what it might say about its fifty-year collaboration with Stalinist counterrevolution, and the kinds of theoretical and practical monsters such collaboration bred. The sign still rules. Therefore no move to the apodictic or universal rings true, and yet we gag at the current rhetoric of detotalization: “We move from place to place and from time to time,”¹⁷ etc. Sooner or later the history of the S.I. is bound to serve in the construction of a new project of resistance. The sooner the better; there is no reason to think the moment will be long coming. What that project will be like is still guesswork. Certainly it will have to struggle to reconceive the tentacular unity of

16. Guy Debord, “Preface to the Third French Edition” [Paris: Gallimard, 1992], in *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), pp. 9–10.

17. Wollen, “Situationist International,” p. 95.

its enemy and articulate the grounds of a unity capable of contesting it. The word “totality” will not put it at panic stations. It will want to know the past. And inevitably it will find itself retelling the stories of those moments of refusal and reorganization—the S.I. being only one of them—that the dreamwork of the Left at present excludes from consciousness.