

## Critique of the Situationist International

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The following text has been based off the [libcom.org](http://libcom.org) version of the article. The text, with greater detail on its background can also be found on [John Gray's Website](#), from which the footnotes for this text have been taken.

### Ideology and the Wage System

Capitalism transforms life into the money necessary for living. One tends to do any particular thing towards an end other than that implied by the content of the activity. The logic of alienation: one is an other; the wage system makes one foreign to what one does, to what one is, to other people.

Now, human activity does not produce only goods and relationships, but also representations. Man is not homo faber: the reduction of human life to the economy (since taken up by official marxism) dates from the enthronement of capital. All activity is symbolic: it creates, at one and the same time, products and a vision of the world. The layout of a primitive village:

summarizes and assures the relations between Man and the universe, between society and the supernatural world, between the living and the dead. (Levi-Strauss).

The fetishism of commodities is merely the form taken by this symbolism in societies dominated by exchange.

As capital tends to produce everything as capital, to parcelize everything so as to re-compose it with the help of market relations, it also makes of representation a specialized sector of production. Stripped of the means of their material existence, wage-workers are also stripped of the means of producing their ideas, which are produced by a specialized sector (whence the role of the "intellectuals", a term introduced in France by the Manifesto of the [dreyfusite] Intellectuals, 1898). The proletarian receives these representations (ideas, images, implicit associations, myths) as he receives from capital the other aspects of his life. Schematically speaking, the nineteenth century worker produced his ideas (even reactionary ones) at the cafe, the bar or the club, while today's worker sees his on television – a tendency which it would certainly be absurd to extrapolate to the point of reducing to it all of reality.

Marx defined ideology as the substitute for a real but impossible change: the change is lived at the level of the imaginary. Modern man is in this situation as extended to every realm. He no longer transforms anything except into images. He travels so as to rediscover the stereotype of the foreign country; loves so as to play the role of the virile lover or the tender beloved etc. Deprived of labor (transformation of environment and self) by

wage-labor, the proletarian lives the “spectacle” of change.

The present-day wage-worker does not live in “abundance” in relation to the nineteenth-century worker who lived in “poverty”. The wage-worker does not simply consume objects, but reproduces the economic and mental structures which weigh on him. It is because of this, contrary to the opinion of Invariance<sup>1</sup>, that he cannot free himself of these representations except by suppressing their material basis. He lives in a community of semiotics which force him to continue: materially (credit), ideologically and psychologically (this community is one of the few available). One does not only consume signs: the constraints are as much, and first of all, economic (bills to be paid, etc.). Capital rests on the production and sale of objects. That these objects also function as signs (and sometimes as that above all) is a fact, but this never annuls their materiality. Only intellectuals believe themselves to be living in a world made purely of signs<sup>2</sup>.

### **True and False**

What are the consequences for the revolutionary movement of the “the function of social appearances in modern capitalism” (I.S. 10, p. 79) ? As Marx and Déjacque<sup>3</sup> put it, communism has always been the dream of the world. Today, the dream also serves not to change reality. One cannot content oneself with “telling” the truth: this can only exist as practice, as relationship between subject and object, saying and doing, expression and transformation, and manifests itself as tension. The “false” is not a screen which blocks the view. The “true” exists within the false, in *Le Monde* or on television, and the “false” within the true, in texts which are revolutionary or which claim to be. The false asserts itself through its practice, by the use which it makes of the truth: the true is so only in transformation. Revolutionary activity that locates itself in what it says on this side of what the radio says is a semi-futility. Let us measure the gap between words and reality. The S.I. demanded that revolutionaries not dazzle with words. Revolutionary theory is not made revolutionary by itself, but by the capacity of those who possess it to put it to subversive use not by a sudden flash, but by a mode of presentation and diffusion which leaves traces, even if scarcely visible ones. The denunciation of Leftists, for example, is secondary. Making it the axis of activity leads to not dealing with fundamental questions for the purposes of polemic against this or that group. Acting in this way modifies the content of ideas and actions. One addresses the essential only through denunciations, and the denunciation quickly becomes the essential.

Face to face with the multiplication of individuals and texts with radical pretensions, the S.I. obliges one to ask: is this theory the product of a subversive social relation seeking its expression, or a production of ideas being diffused without contributing to a practical unification? Everyone listens to the radio, but radio sets unify proletarians in the service of capital – until the day when these technical means are seized by revolutionary proletarians, at which time one hour of broadcasting will be worth years of previous

<sup>1</sup> Translator’s footnote: Invariance: journal published by a group which split from the International Communist Party, itself the most dogmatic and voluntarist by-product of the “Bordigist” Italian left. After several years of obscure, though occasionally brilliant theoretical involutions, Invariance’s editor Jacques Camatte arrived at the position that capital has “escaped the law of value” and that therefore the proletariat has disappeared. For a presentation in English of his views, see *The Wandering of Humanity* published by Black and Red, Detroit.

<sup>2</sup> Translator’s footnote : The term “sign” is used in structuralist writing to mean a signifier (representation) that has become separated from what it originally signified (a phenomenon in the world). A “sign” thus implies a representation which refers only to itself, i.e. is “tautological”. One example of a “sign” would be the credit extended in ever greater quantities to bankrupt nations by large banks, credit which cannot possibly be repaid: it is a representation of commodities which will never be produced.)

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s footnote: Joseph Déjacque: French communist artisan active in the 1848 rising. A collection of his writings is available under the title *A Bas les chefs* (Champ Libre, Paris 1974).

“propaganda”<sup>4</sup>.

However, the “end of ideology” does not mean that there could be a society without ideas, functioning automatically, like a machine: this would presuppose a “robotized” and thus a non-“human” society, since it would be deprived of the necessary reaction of its members. Having become an ideology in the sense of The German Ideology, the imaginary develops exactly along these lines. There is no dictatorship of social relations which remote-controls us, without reaction and reflection on our part. This is a very partial vision of “barbarism”. The mistake in descriptions of completely totalitarian societies (Orwell’s 1984 or the film THX 1138) is that they do not see that all societies, even the most oppressive, presuppose the intervention and action of human beings in their unfolding. Every society, including and especially capitalist society, lives on these tensions, even though it risks being destroyed by them. The critique of ideology denies neither the role of ideas nor that of collective action in propagating them.

### **The Theoretical Deadend of the Notion of the “Spectacle”**

The notion of the spectacle unites a large number of given basic facts by showing society – and thus its revolutionary transformation – as activity. Capitalism does not “mystify” the workers. The activity of revolutionaries does not demystify; it is the expression of a real social movement. The revolution creates a different activity whose establishment is a condition of what classical revolutionary theory called “political” tasks (destruction of the State).

But the S.I. was not able to conceive in this way of the notion which it had brought to light. It invested so much in this notion that it reconstructed the whole of revolutionary theory around the spectacle.

In its theory of “bureaucratic capitalism”, Socialisme ou Barbarie (S ou B) had capital rest on the bureaucracy. In its theory of “spectacular commodity society”, the S.I. explained everything from the spectacle. One does not construct a revolutionary theory except as a whole, and by basing it on what is fundamental to social life. No, the question of “social appearances” is not the key to any new revolutionary endeavor (I.S. #10, p. 79).

The traditional revolutionary groups had only seen new means of conditioning. But for the S.I., the mode of expression of the “media” corresponds to a way of life which did not exist a hundred years ago. Television does not indoctrinate, but inscribes itself into a mode of being. The S.I. showed the relationship between the form and foundation, where traditional marxism saw nothing but new instruments in the service of the same cause.

Meanwhile, the notion of the spectacle elaborated by the S.I. falls behind what Marx and Engels understood by the term “ideology”. Debord’s book *The Society of the Spectacle* presents itself as an attempt to explain capitalist society and revolution, when in fact it only considers their forms, important but not determinant phenomena. It robs the description of them in a theorization which gives the impression of a fundamental analysis, when in fact the method, and the subject being studied, remain always at the level of social appearances. At this level, the book is outstanding. The trouble is that it is written (and read) as if one were going to find something in it that isn’t there. While *S ou B* analyzed the revolutionary problem by means of industrial sociology, the S.I. analyzes it starting out from a reflection on the surface of society. This is not to say that *The Society of the Spectacle* is superficial. Its contradiction and, ultimately, its theoretical and practical dead-end, is to have made a study of the profound, through and by means of the

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<sup>4</sup> Translator’s footnote: The struggle over Radio Renascença in Portugal during 1975 bears out this point.

superficial appearance. The S.I. had no analysis of capital: it understood it, but through its effects. It criticized the commodity, not capital - or rather, it criticized capital as commodity, and not as a system of valuation which includes production as well as exchange.

Throughout the book, Debord remains at the stage of circulation, lacking the necessary moment of production, of productive labor. What nourishes capital is not consumption, as he leads one to understand, but the formation of value by labor. Debord is right to see more in the relation between appearance and reality than in that between illusion and the reality, as if appearances did not exist. But one never understands the real on the basis of the apparent. Thus Debord does not complete his project. He does not show how capitalism makes what is only the result into the cause or even into the movement. The critique of political economy (which Debord does not make, content to ignore it as were the utopians before him) shows how the proletariat sees standing over and against him not only his product, but his activity. In the fetishism of commodities, the commodity appears as its own movement. By the fetishism of capital, capital takes on an autonomy which it does not possess, presenting itself as a living being (Invariance is a victim of this illusion): one does not know where it comes from, who produces it, by what process the proletariat engenders it, by what contradiction it lives and may die. Debord makes the spectacle into the subject of capitalism, instead of showing how it is produced by capitalism. He reduces capitalism to its spectacular dimension alone. The movement of capital becomes the movement of the spectacle. In the same way *Banalités de base*<sup>5</sup> makes a history of the spectacle through religion, myth, politics, philosophy, etc. This theory remains limited to a part of the real relations, and goes so far as to make them rest entirely on this part.

The spectacle is activity become passive. The S.I. rediscovered what Marx said in the Grundrisse about the rising-up of Man's being (his self-transformation, his labor) as an alien power which crushes him: facing it, he no longer lives, he only looks. The S.I. brought a new vigor to this theme. But capital is more than pacification. It needs the intervention of the proletariat, as *S ou B*<sup>6</sup> said. The S.I.'s overestimation of the spectacle is the sign that it theorizes on the basis of a social vision born at the periphery of society, and which it believed to be central.

### **The Spectacle and the Theory of Art**

The theory of the spectacle expresses the crisis of the space-time outside labor. Capital more and more creates a realm outside of labor according to the logic of its economy: it does not develop leisure to control the masses, but because it reduces living labor to a lesser role in production, diminishes labor-time, and adds to the wage-worker's time of inactivity. Capital creates for the wage-workers a space-time that is excluded, empty, because consumption never succeeds in filling it completely. To speak of space-time is to insist on the fact that there is a reduction in the working day, and that this freed time also occupies a geographical and social space, in particular the street (c.f. the importance of the city and of the derive<sup>7</sup> for the S.I.).

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<sup>5</sup> Translator's footnote: Appeared in English as *The Totality for Kids*.

<sup>6</sup> Translator's footnote: In a series of articles in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, it was shown how capitalist industry needs the active and creative cooperation of workers in order to function. The most telling example of this is the British rank-and-file workers' tactic of the "work to rule" in which all jobs are carried out precisely according to union contract and employer specification. This usually results in a decline in output by anywhere up to 50 percent. (Tr.)

<sup>7</sup> Translator's footnote: This concept was central to the "unitary urbanism" of the early S.I.. Loosely translated it means drifting around, usually on foot, in a city, and exploring and analyzing the life of the city thereby. (Tr.)

This situation coincides with a dual crisis of “art”. Firstly, art no longer has meaning because Western society doesn’t know where it’s going. With 1914, the West lost the meaning and direction of civilization. Scientism, liberalism and apologetics for the “liberating” effect of productive forces went bankrupt like their adversaries (Romanticism, etc.). From then on, art was to be tragic, narcissistic, or the negation of itself. In former periods of crisis, one sought the meaning of the world: today, one doubts if it has one. Secondly, the colonization of the market and the vain and frenzied search for a “direction” enlist the artist in the service of consumption outside of labor.

The S.I. is conscious of its social origin. *Sur le passage de quelques personnes...* (1959), one of Debord’s films, speaks of people “on the margin of the economy.” On this terrain, like *S ou B* on the terrain of the enterprise, the S.I. understood that modern capitalism tends to exclude people from all activity and at the same time to engage them in a pseudo participation. But, like *S ou B*, it makes a decisive criterion out of the contradiction between active and passive. Revolutionary practice consists of breaking the very principle of the spectacle: non-intervention (I.S. # 1, p. 110). At the end of the process, the workers council will be the means of being active, of breaking down separation. Capital endures by the exclusion of human beings, their passivity. What moves in the direction of a refusal of passivity is revolutionary. Hence the revolutionary is defined by “a new style of life” which will be an “example” (I.S. #6, p. 4).

The realm outside labor rests on bonds that are more contingent (c.f. the derive) and subjective than wage labor, which belongs more to the necessary and the objective. To the traditional economy, the S.I. opposes “an economy of desires” (I.S. #7, p. 16); to necessity, it opposes freedom; to effort, pleasure; to labor, the automation which makes it unnecessary; to sacrifice, delight. The S.I. reverses the oppositions which must be superceded. Communism does not free one from the necessity of labor, it overthrows “labor” itself (as a separate and alien activity - Tr.). The S.I. identifies revolution with a liberation from constraints, based on desire and first of all on the desire for others, the need for relationships. It makes the link between “situation” and “labor” badly, which limits its notion of the situation. It thinks of society and its revolution from the context of non-wage-earning social layers. Hence, it carries over onto the productive proletariat what it said about those who are outside the wage system (street gangs, ghetto blacks). Because it was ignorant of the center of gravity of the movement, the S.I. moved toward councilism: the councils permit a “direct and active communication” (Society of the Spectacle). The revolution appeared as the extension of the construction of intersubjective situations to the whole of society.

The critique of the S.I. passes through the recognition of its “avant-garde artist” aspect. Its sociological origin often provokes abusive and absurd interpretations of the “they were petty-bourgeois” variety. The question is clearly elsewhere. In the case of the S.I., it theorized from its own social experience. The S.I.’s artistic origin is not a stigma in itself; but it leaves its mark on theory and evolution when the group envisages the world from the point of view of its specific social layer. The passing to a revolutionary theory and action that were general (no longer aimed only at art, urbanism, etc.) corresponds to a precise logic on the S.I.’s part. The S.I. says that each new issue of its journal can and must allow one to re-read all the previous issues in a new way. This is indeed the characteristic of a theory which is growing richer, being enriched, and the opposite of *S ou B*. It is not a matter of, on one side the general aspect of the S.I., and on the other its more or less critical relationship to art. The critique of separation was its guiding thread. In art, as in the council, in self-management, in workers’ democracy and in organization (c.f. its Minimum definition of revolutionary organizations), the S.I. wanted to break down separation, to create a real community. While the S.I. refused “questioning” la Cardan, it ended by adopting the problematic of “participation” la Chaulieu.

## The S.I. and Socialisme ou Barbarie

In order to attain “the transparency of inter-subjective relations”, the S.I. wound up with the councilism supported by *S ou B*. The council is the means of rediscovering unity. Debord met the *S ou B* through Canjuers and joined it for several months. His membership was not mentioned in the S.I. journal. On the contrary: *La Veritable Scission*<sup>8</sup>, speaking of Khayati, excludes on principle “a double membership (in both the S.I. and another group) which would immediately border on manipulation” (p. 85). However that may be, Debord participated in the activities of *S ou B*, throughout the time he was a member, notably taking part in the team that was sent to Belgium during the great strike of 1960. At the end of an international meeting organized by *S ou B*, which was at once deceptive and revealing of the lack of perspectives, and which concluded with a pretentious speech by Chaulieu on the tasks of *S ou B*, Debord announced his resignation. Not without irony, he declared that he was in accord with the vast perspectives outlined by Chaulieu, but that he did not feel equal to so immense a task.

I.S. #6 (1961) adopted the idea of the councils, if not councilism; in any case it adopted the thesis of the division between “order-givers” and “order-takers”. The project which the S.I. set for itself in I.S. M, comprising among others “the study without illusions of the classical workers’ movement” and of Marx, was not to be realized. The S.I. was to remain ignorant of the reality of the communist left, particularly Bordiga. The most radical of the revolutionary movement would always be an improved *S ou B*. It saw theory through this filter.

Vaneigem’s *Banalities de base* cheerfully bypasses Marx. and rewrites history in the light of *S ou B*, while adding to it the critique of the commodity. The S.I. criticized *S ou B* but only in terms of degree: for the S.I., *S ou B* limited socialism to workers management, while in fact it meant management of everything. Chaulieu confined himself to the factory, Debord wanted to self-manage life. Vaneigem’s procedure is close to that of Cardan. He looks for a sign (evidence): no longer the shameless exploitation of workers on the shop-floor, but the misery of social relationships, there is the revolutionary detonator:

The feeble quality of the spectacle and of everyday life becomes the only sign.

*La Veritable Scission...* would also speak of a sign of what was unbearable. Vaneigem is against vulgar marxism, but he does not integrate marxism into a critique. He does not assimilate what was revolutionary about Marx that established marxism has obliterated. In I.S. #9 (1963), the S.I. still acknowledged that Cardan was “in advance” of it.

Like Society of the Spectacle, *Banalities de base* situates itself at the level of ideology and its contradictions. Vaneigem shows how religion has become the spectacle, which obliges revolutionary theory to criticize the spectacle as it once had to start out from a critique of religion and philosophy. But in this way one obtains only the (pre) condition of revolutionary theory: the work remains to be done. The S.I. at first hoped for a lot from Lefebvre<sup>9</sup> and Cardan, then violently rejected them. But it kept in common with them the lack of both a theory of capitalism and a theory of society. Toward 1960, it opened up to new horizons but did not take the step. The S.I. confronted value (c.f.

<sup>8</sup> Translator’s footnote: *La veritable scission dans l’Internationale*: Editions Champ Libre. Documents by various members of the S.I. concerning the splitting and dissolution of the group.

<sup>9</sup> Translator’s footnote: Henri Lefebvre: at one time the most sophisticated philosophical apologist for the French CP (c.f. his *Dialectical Materialism*, Cape Editions, London). Lefebvre broke with the Party and during the late ‘50’s and early ‘60s began to construct a “critical theory of everyday life”. His work was important to the S.I. although he never transcended a fundamentally academic and sociologicistic viewpoint. The S.I. denounced him after he published a text on the Paris Commune which was largely stolen from the S.I.’s earlier “Theses” on the same topic.

Jorn's text on political economy and use value) but did not recognize it for what it was. Its theory had neither centrality nor globality. This led it to overestimate very diverse social movements, without seeing the kernel of the problem.

It is, for example, incontestable that the article on Watts<sup>10</sup> (#9, 1964) is a brilliant theoretical breakthrough. Taking up in its own way what might have been said about the exchange between Mauss and Bataille, the S.I. posed the question of the modification of the very substance of capitalist society. The article's conclusion even takes up once again Marx's formulation about the link between Man and his generic nature, taken up at the same time by Camatte in the P.C.I.<sup>11</sup> (c.f. #1 of Invariance). But staying at the level of the commodity, the S.I. was incapable of differentiating between the levels of society, and of singling out what makes a revolution. When it writes that

a revolt against the spectacle situates itself at the level of the totality...

it proves that it is making the spectacle into the totality. In the same way its "managementist" illusions led it to distort the facts concerning Algeria after Boumedienne's coup d'etat:

The only program of the Algerians socialist elements is the defense of the self-managed sector, not only as it is, but as it ought to be. (#9, 1964, p. 21).

In other words, without revolution, that is to say, without the destruction of the State and key transformations in society, the S.I. believed that there could be workers' management, and that revolutionaries should work for its extension.

## Positive Utopia

The S.I. allows the recognition at the level of revolutionary activity of the implications of the development of capital since 1914, already recognized by the communist left insofar as this development involved reformism, nations, wars, the evolution of the state, etc. The S.I. had crossed the path of the communist left.

The S.I. understood the communist movement and the revolution as the production by the proletarians of new relations to each other and to "things". It rediscovered the Marxian idea of communism as the movement of self-creation by men of their own relations. With the exception of Bordiga, it was the first to connect again with the utopian tradition. This was at once its strength and its ambiguity.

The S.I. was initially a revolt which sought to take back the cultural means monopolized by money and power. Previously the most lucid artists had wanted to break the separation between art and life: the S.I. raised this demand to a higher level in their desire to abolish the distance between life and revolution. "Experimentation" had been for surrealism an illusory means of wrenching art out of its isolation from reality: the S.I. applied it in order to found a positive utopia. The ambiguity comes from the fact that the S.I. did not know exactly whether it was a matter of living differently from now on or only of heading that way.

The culture to be overthrown will not really fall except along with the totality of the socio-economic formation which upholds it. But, without further ado, the S.I. proposes to confront it throughout its length and breadth, up to and including the imposition of an autonomous situationist control and

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<sup>10</sup> Translator's footnote: Published in the U.S. as *Decline and Fall of the Spectacular Commodity Economy*.

<sup>11</sup> Translator's footnote: Internationalist Communist Party (founded in 1943). Their English journal is *Communist Program*.

experimentation against those who hold the existing cultural authority(ies), i.e. up to and including a state of dual power within culture... The center of such a development within culture would first of all have to be UNESCO once the S.I. had taken command of it: a new type of popular university, detached from the old culture; lastly, utopian centers to be built which, in relation to certain existing developments in the social space of leisure, would have to be more completely liberated from the ruling daily life... would function as bridge-heads for a new invasion of everyday life. (#5, 1960, pp. 5 & 31).

The idea of a gradual liberation is coherent with that of a self-management spreading everywhere little by little: it misunderstands society as a totality. Besides this, it grants privilege to "culture", the "center of meaning of a meaningless society" (#5, p. 5).

This exaggeration of the role of culture was later to be carried over into workers' autonomy: the "power of the councils" was supposed to spread until it occupied the whole of society. These two traits have deep roots in the origins of the S.I.. The problem, then, is not that the S.I. remained too "artistic" in the Bohemian sense, lacking in "rigor" (as if the "Marxists" were rigorous), but that it applied the same approach throughout.

The projects for "another" life were legion in the S.I.. I.S. #6 (1961) dealt with an experimental town. At the Goteborg conference, Vaneigem spoke of constructing situationist bases, in preparation for a unitary urbanism and a liberated life. This speech (says the account of the proceeding) met with no opposition (#7, 1962, p. 27).

One makes an organization: revolutionary groups "have no right to exist as a permanent vanguard unless they themselves set the example of a new style of life." (#7, p. 16). The overestimation of organization and of the responsibility of living differently now led, obviously, to a self-overestimation of the S.I.. Trocchi declares in #7:

We envisage a situation in which life is continually renewed by art, a situation constructed by the imagination... we have already gone through enough experiences in a preparatory direction: we are ready to act. (pp. 50 & 53).

A significant fact: the critique of this article in the following issue did not pick up on this aspect (#8, pp. 3-5). Trocchi was to realize this program in his own way in Project Sigma: the S.I. did not disavow it, but only stated that Trocchi was not undertaking this project in his capacity as a member of the S.I. (#9, p. 83).

The ambiguity was brought to a head by Vaneigem who in fact wrote a treatise on how to live differently in the present world while setting forth what social relations could be. It is a handbook to violating the logic of the market and the wage system wherever one can get away with it. *La Veritable Scission...* has some harsh words for Vaneigem and his book. Debord and Sanguinetti were right to speak of "exorcism":

He has said so as not to be (p. 143).

No doubt. But the critique is belated. Vaneigem's book was a difficult work to produce because it cannot be lived, threatened with falling on the one hand into a marginal possibilism and on the other into an imperative which is unrealizable and thus moral. Either one huddles in the crevices of bourgeois society, or one ceaselessly opposes to it a different life which is impotent because only the revolution can make it a reality. The S.I. put the worst of itself into its worst text. Vaneigem was the weakest side of the S.I., the one which reveals all its weaknesses. The positive utopia is revolutionary as demand, as tension, because it cannot be realized within this society: it becomes derisory when one tries to live it today. Instead of hammering away at Vaneigem as an individual, The Real Split... could have drawn up the balance sheet of the practice which had produced



Vaneigem, but there was no such balance sheet (see below).

The reformism of the everyday was later transferred to the level of work; arriving late for work, writes Ratgeb<sup>12</sup> is the beginning of a critique of wage labor. We are not seeking to make fun of Vaneigem, unhappy theoretician of an art of living, "la radicalité". His brio only succeeds in giving the Treatise an empty pretension which makes one smile. The Real Split... is ill inspired to mock the attitude of Vaneigem in May 1968, when he left for his vacation as planned even though the "events" had begun (he quickly returned). This personal contradiction reflected the theoretical and practical contradiction sustained by the S.I. from its beginnings. Like every morality, Vaneigem's position was untenable and had to explode on contact with reality. The S.I. in denouncing his attitude gave itself over also to a moralistic practice: it judged acts without examining their causes. This revelation of Vaneigem's past, whether it troubles or amuses the radicalists, has besides something unpleasant about it. If Vaneigem's inconsistency in 1968 was important, the S.I. should have drawn conclusions from it, as it did not fail to do in a host of other cases, and should not have waited until four years later to talk about it. If Vaneigem's default was not important, it was useless to talk about it, even when he broke with the S.I.. In fact the S.I., to use its own expression, exorcised the impotence of its morality by denouncing the individuals who failed in upholding this morality, thus saving at one blow both the morality and itself as the S.I.. Vaneigem was the scapegoat for an impossible utopianism.

### **Materialism and Idealism in the S.I.**

Against militant moralism, the S.I. extolled another morality: that of the autonomy of individuals in the social group and in the revolutionary group. Now, only an activity integrated into a social movement permits autonomy through an effective practice. Otherwise the requirement of autonomy ends up by creating an elite of those who know how to make themselves autonomous<sup>13</sup>. Whoever says elitism also says disciples. The S.I. showed a great organizational idealism, as did Bordiga (the revolutionary as "disintoxicated"), even though the S.I. resolved it differently. The S.I. had recourse to an immediate practical morality, which illustrates its contradiction. Every morality puts on top of the given social relations the obligation to behave in a way which runs counter to those relations. In this case, the S.I.'s morality requires that one be respectful of spontaneity.

The S.I.'s materialism is limited to the awareness of society as intersubjectivity, as interaction of human relationships on the immediate plane, neglecting the totality: but society is also the production of its own material conditions, and the immediate relations crystallize into institutions, with the state at their head. The "creation of concrete situations" is only one facet of the revolutionary movement. In theorizing it, the S.I. does indeed start out from the real conditions of existence, but reduces them to intersubjective relations. This is the point of view of the subject trying to rediscover itself, not a view which encompasses both subject and object. It is the "subject" stripped of its "representation". The systematization of this opposition in *The Society of the Spectacle* takes up again the idealist opposition characterized by its forgetting of Man's objectifications (labor, appropriation of the world, fusion of Man and nature). The subject-object opposition is the guiding thread of Western philosophy, formed in a world whose meaning Man sees escaping him

<sup>12</sup> Translator's footnote: Ratgeb: pseudonym used by Vaneigem for his book, *De la greve sauvage a l'auto-gestion generalisee* Editions 10/18, Paris, 1973.

<sup>13</sup> Translator's footnote: This fetishism of "autonomy" developed into a nasty little game among the "pro-situ" groups. They would solicit "dialogue" from people who "saw themselves" in one of their texts. When naive sympathizers responded, they would be encouraged to engage in some "autonomous practice" so as to prove that they were not "mere spectators." The most sincere among them would then attempt this. The result would invariably be savagely denounced by the pro-situ group as "incoherent", "confusionist", etc. and relations would be broken off.

little by little. Already Descartes was setting side by side the progress of mathematics and the stagnation of metaphysics. Mercantile Man is in search of his role.

The S.I. was not interested in production. It reproached Marx for being too economistic, but did not itself make a critique of political economy. Society is an ensemble of relations which assert themselves by objectifying themselves, creating material or social objects (institutions); the revolution destroys capitalism by a human action at the level of its objectifications (system of production, classes, state) carried out precisely by those who are at the center of these relations.

Debord is to Freud what Marx is to Hegel: he founds what is only a materialist theory of personal relationships, a contradiction in terms. Instead of starting from the ensemble of social relations, the notion of the "construction of situations" isolates the relation between subjects from the totality of relations. In the same way as, for Debord, the spectacle says all there is to be said about capitalism, the revolution appears as the construction of situations expanded to the whole of society. The S.I. did not grasp the mediations on which society rests; and foremost among these, labor, the "fundamental need" (William Morris) of Man. As a consequence of this, it did not clearly discern the mediations on the basis of which a revolution can be made. To get out of the difficulty it exaggerated the mediation of the organization. Its councilist, democratic and self-management-ist positions are explained by its ignorance of the social dynamic.

The S.I. insisted on forms of organization to remedy the inadequacy of the content which escaped it. Practicing "the inversion of the genitive" like Marx in his early work, it put things back on their feet: inverting the terms of ideology so as to understand the world in its reality. But a real understanding would be more than an inversion: Marx was not content to turn Hegel and the Young Hegelians upside down.

The S.I. only saw capital in the form of the commodity, ignoring the cycle as a whole. Of *Capital*, Debord only retains the first sentence, without understanding it: capital presents itself as an accumulation of commodities, but it is more than that. The S.I. saw the revolution as a calling into question more of the relations of distribution (c.f. the Watts riot) than of the relations of production. It was acquainted with the commodity but not with surplus value.

The S.I. showed that the communist revolution could not be only an immediate attack on the commodity. This contribution is decisive. Although the Italian Left had described communism as the destruction of the market, and had already broken with the ideology of the productive forces, it had not understood the formidable subversive power of concretely communist measures<sup>14</sup>. Bordiga, in fact, pushes social communization back beyond a seizure of "political power". The S.I. viewed the revolutionary process at the level of human relations. Even the State cannot be destroyed strictly on the military plane. The mediation of society, it is also (but not) solely destroyed by the demolition of the capitalist social relations which uphold it.

The S.I. ended up with the opposite mistake to Bordiga's. The latter reduced the revolution to the application of a program: the former limited it to an overthrow of immediate relations. Neither Bordiga nor the S.I. perceived the whole problem. The one conceived a totality abstracted from its real measures and relations, the other a totality without unity or determination hence an addition of particular points extending itself little by little. Incapable of theoretically dominating the whole process, they both had recourse to

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<sup>14</sup> Translator's footnote: Such as the subversive effect of the mass refusal to pay and the free distribution of goods and services carried out by the Italian "self-reduction" movement. Naturally, in a full-fledged revolutionary situation, this would go much further and would include the immediate communization of key means of production both to provide for the survival of the proletarian movement and to undermine the resource base of the remaining capitalist forces.

an organizational palliative to ensure the unity of the process – the party for Bordiga, the councils for the S.I.. In practice, while Bordiga depersonalized the revolutionary movements to the point of excess, the S.I. was an affirmation of individuals to the point of elitism. Although it was totally ignorant of Bordiga, the S.I. allows one to develop Bordiga's thesis on the revolution further by means of a synthesis with its own.

The S.I. itself was not able to realize this synthesis, which presupposes an all-round vision of what society is. It practised positive utopianism only for the purpose of revelation, and that is without doubt its theoretical stumbling block.

What must happen... in the centers of unequally shared but vital experience is a demystification. (#7, p. 48).

There was a society of "the spectacle", a society of "false consciousness", as opposed to the supposedly classical capitalism of the 19th century: it was a matter of giving it a time consciousness of itself. The S.I. never separated itself from Lukacsian idealism, as is shown by the only critique of the S.I. which has appeared up to the present: *Supplement au no. 301 de la Nouvelle Gazette Rhenane*<sup>15</sup>. Lukacs knew (with the help of Hegel and Marx) that capitalism is the loss of unity, the dispersion of consciousness. But, instead of concluding from this that the proletarians will recompose a unitary world view by means of their subversive practice (concluding in the revolution), he thought that consciousness must be reunified and rediscovered first in order for this subversion to happen. As this is impossible he too fled back into magic and theorized the need for a concretization of consciousness which must be incarnated in an organization before the revolution is possible. This organized consciousness is the "party". One sees immediately that, for Lukacs, the justification of the party is secondary: what is primary is the idealism of consciousness, the primacy accorded to consciousness of which the party is only the manifestation. What is essential in his theory is that consciousness must be incarnated in an organization. The S.I. takes up in an uncritical way Lukacs' theory of consciousness but replaces the "party" with the S.I. on one side and the councils on the other. For the S.I., as for Lukacs, the difference between "class in itself" and "class for itself" is that the latter possesses class consciousness. That this consciousness would not be brought to it by a party, but would spring spontaneously from the organization of the workers into councils is quite secondary. The S.I. conceived of itself as an organization destined to make the truth burst forth: it made revelation the principle of its action. This explains the inordinate importance which the S.I. saw in the tendency toward "total democracy" in 1968. Democracy is the perfect place for consciousnesses to elucidate themselves. Everything is summed up in the S.I.'s definition of a proletarian as one who "has no control over the use of his life and who knows it".

Art is today voluntary alienation; in it the systematic practice of artifice renders more visible the facticity of life. Shutting itself in its idea of the "spectacle", the S.I. remained a prisoner of its origins. *The Society of the Spectacle* is already a completed book. The theory of appearances turns back on itself. Here one can even read the beginnings of currently fashionable ideas about capital as representation. Capital becomes image... the concentrated result of social labor... becomes apparent and submits the whole of reality to appearance.

The S.I. was born at the same moment as all the theses about "communication" and language and in reaction against them, but it mostly tended to pose the same problem in different terms. The S.I. was formed as a critique of communication, and never departed from this point of origin: the council realizes a "true" communication. In spite of this, unlike Barthes and his ilk, the S.I. refused to let the sign turn back on itself. It did not want

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<sup>15</sup> Translator's footnote: Published in 1975. Distributed by Editions de l'Oubli, Paris.

to study apparent reality (the study of “mythologies” or of the “superstructures” dear to Gramsci’s heart) but rather reality as appearance. Marx wrote in 1847:

Human activity = commodity. The manifestation of life, active life, appears as a mere means: appearance, separate from this activity, is grasped as an end in itself.

The S.I. itself succumbed to fetishism in fixating itself on forms: commodity, subject, organization, consciousness. But unlike those who today repeat its ideas while conserving only the flashy parts and the mistakes (utopia, etc.), the S.I. did not make it a rule to confuse language with society. What was for the S.I. a contradiction became the *raison d’être* of modernism.

### **No Theoretical Summing up**

Nothing is easier than a false summing-up. One can even do it over, like the famous self-criticism, every time one changes one’s ideas. One renounces the old system of thought so as to enter the new one, but one does not change one’s mode of being. The “theoretical summing-up” can be in fact the most deceitful practice while appearing to be the most honest. The Real Split... succeeds in not talking about the S.I. and its end, except so as not to grapple with its conceptions – in a word, it talks about it non-theoretically. Denouncing (no doubt sincerely) triumphalism and self-sufficiency in relation to the S.I. and in the S.I. but without a theoretical critique, the book ends up presenting the S.I. as a model. Debord and Sanguinetti don’t get to the point except with the pro-situs, who inspired them to some good reflections, but still at the level of subjective relations, of attitudes. Theory is always seen from the standpoint of attitudes which incarnate it; an important dimension certainly, but not an exclusive one.

There is no self-analysis of the S.I.. The S.I. came, 1968 announces the return of the revolution, now the S.I. is going to disappear so as to be reborn everywhere. This lucid modesty masks two essential points: the authors argue as though the S.I.’s perspective had been totally correct; they do not ask themselves whether there might not be a link between the sterility of the S.I. after 1968 (c.f. the correspondence of the Orientation Debate) and the insufficiency of that perspective. Even on the subject of the pro-situs, Debord and Sanguinetti fail to establish any logical relation between the S.I. and its disciples. The S.I. was revolutionary with the aid of a theory based on attitudes (which would later prove to be a brake on its evolution). After the phase of revolutionary action, the pro-situ retained nothing but the attitude. One cannot judge a master solely by his disciples: but he also has, in part, disciples he has called forth. The S.I. accepted the role of master involuntarily, through its very conceptions. It did not directly propose a *savoir-vivre*, but in presenting its ideas as a “*savoir-vivre*” it pushed an art of living on its readers. The Real Split... registers the ideological use to which I.S. was put, its being turned into a spectacle, says the book, by half the readers of the journal. This was partly inevitable (see below on recuperation) but in part also due to its own nature. Every radical theory or movement is recuperated by its weaknesses: Marx, by his study of the economy in-itself and his radical-reformist tendencies, the German Left by its councilism, etc. Revolutionaries remain revolutionaries by profiting from these recuperations, eliminating their limitations so as to advance toward a more developed totalization. The Real Split... is also a split in the minds of its authors. Their critique of Vaneigem is made as if his ideas were foreign to the S.I.. To read Debord and Sanguinetti, one would think that the S.I. had no responsibility for the *Traite*: Vaneigem’s weakness, one would think, belongs to him alone. One or the other: either the S.I. did indeed take his faults into account – in which case why didn’t it say something about them? – or else it ignored them. The S.I.

here inaugurates a practice of organization (which *S ou B* would have qualified with the word “bureaucratic”): one does not learn of the deviations of members until after their exclusion. The organization retains its purity, the errors of its members do not affect it. The trouble comes from the insufficiencies of the members, never from on high, and not from the organization. As the eventual megalomania of the leaders does not explain everything, one is obliged to see in this behavior the sign of a mystified coming-to-consciousness of the group’s impasse, and of a magical way of solving it. Debord was the S.I.. He dissolved it: this would have been proof of a lucid and honest attitude if he had not at the same time eternized it. He dissolved the S.I. so as to make it perfect, as little open to criticism as he was little able to criticize it himself.

In the same way, his film *Society of the Spectacle* is an excellent means of eternizing his book. Immobilism goes side by side with the absence of summing-up. Debord had learned nothing. The book was a partial theorization: the film totalizes it. This sclerosis is even more striking in what was added for the film’s re-release in 1976. Debord replies to a series of criticisms of the film, but says not a word about various people (some of them very far removed from our own conceptions) who judged the film severely from a revolutionary point of view. He prefers to take on *Le Nouvel Observateur*<sup>16</sup>. More and more, his problem is to defend his past. He runs aground of necessity, because all he can do is re-interpret it. The S.I. no longer belongs to him. The revolutionary movement will assimilate it in spite of the situationists.

### **An Exercise in Style**

Otherwise serious, Sanguinetti’s book *Veridique Rapport*<sup>17</sup> is still a mark of his failure (echec). We will not judge the book by its public, which appreciates it as a good joke played on the bourgeoisie. These readers are content to repeat that the capitalists are cretins, even that they are contemptible compared to “real” ruling classes of the past; if we wanted to, they say, we could be far bigger and better bourgeois. Elitism and scorn for capitalism are derisory enough as reactions, but reassuring when revolution does not appear any longer to be an absolute certainty. But complacency in the denunciation of bourgeois decadence is far from being subversive. It is shared by those (like Sorel) who scorn the bourgeoisie while wanting to save capitalism. The cultivation of this attitude is thus absurd in anyone who has the slightest revolutionary pretensions. Let us admit in any case that Sanguinetti scored a good shot.

The problem most commentators fail to deal with (and for good reason) is to know whether he puts forward a revolutionary perspective. If he does not he has only succeeded in letting off a firecracker within bourgeois politics and the game of the parties. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. His analysis of past events is false, and so is the revolutionary perspective he proposes.

First of all, there was no “social war” in Italy in 1969 nor in Portugal in 1976. May 1968 in France was the upsurge of a vast spontaneous workers’ organization: on the scale of a whole country, and in hundreds of big enterprises, proletarians partook at the same moment of the “proletarian experience”, of confrontation with the state and the unions, and understood in acts that working-class reformism only serves capital. This experience will remain. It was an indispensable break, and a lasting one even though the wound now seems to have been closed again.

But the S.I. took this break for the revolution itself. 1968 realized for it what 1966 realized for *S ou B*: the practical verification of its theory, in fact the confirmation of its limits

<sup>16</sup> A left-wing intellectual French weekly.

<sup>17</sup> Translator’s footnote: *Veridique rapport sur les derniers chances de sauver le capitalisme en Italie.*

and the beginning of its getting tangled up. *La Veritable Scission...* asserts that the occupation movement<sup>18</sup> had situationist ideas: when one knows that almost all the strikers left control of the strike to the unions, unless one mythologizes the occupation movement, this shows only the limits of situationist ideas. This ignorance of the state on the part of the movement was not a supersession of jacobinism, but its corollary, as it was in the Commune: the non-destruction of the state, its simple democratization, went side by side in 1871 with an attempt by some people to create a dictatorship on the model of 1793. It is true that looking at 1871 or 1968 – one would have to show the strength and not the weakness of the communist movement, its existence rather than its absence. Otherwise the revolutionary only develops a superior pessimism and an abstract negation of everything which is not “the revolution”. But the revolutionary movement is such only if it criticizes itself, insisting on the global perspective, on what was missing in past proletarian movements. It does not valorize the past. It is the state and the counterrevolution that take up the limits of past movements and make their program out of them. Theoretical communism criticizes previous experiences, but also distinguishes between proletarian assault as in Germany in 1918-21, and attacks that were immediately bogged down by capital as in 1871 and in Spain in 1936. It is not content to describe positive movements, but also indicates the ruptures which they had to effect in order to make the revolution. The S.I. did the opposite. Moreover, starting in 1968, it theorized a rising revolution. But above all it denied the question of the state.

When the workers are able to assemble freely and without mediations to discuss their real problems, the state begins to dissolve. (The Real Split, p.33).

All of anarchism is there. Far from wanting, as one would expect, to demolish the state, anarchism is most precisely characterized by its indifference to it. Contrary to that “Marxism” which puts foremost and above all else the necessity of “taking power”, anarchism in fact consists of a neglect of the question of state power. The revolution unfolds, committees and assemblies form parallel to the state, which, emptied of its power, collapses of its own accord. Founded on a materialist conception of society, revolutionary marxism asserts that capital is not only a soda, spread out thinly everywhere, but that it is also concentrated in institutions (and first of all armed force) which are endowed with a certain autonomy, and which never die by themselves. The revolution only triumphs by bringing against them an action at once generalized and concentrated. The military struggle is based on the social transformation, but has its own specific role. The S.I. for its part, gave way to anarchism, and exaggerated the importance of workers’ assemblies (in 1968, Pouvoir Ouvrier and the Groupe de Liaison pour l’Action des Travailleurs were also preoccupied essentially with calling for democratic workers’ assemblies).

In the same way, to say that in Portugal the pressure of the workers hindered the construction of the modern capitalist state, is to have only the viewpoint of the state, of capital. Is capital’s problem to develop in Portugal, to constitute a new and powerful pole of accumulation there? Wasn’t the objective of the “revolution of the carnations” to channel confused popular and proletarian aspirations toward illusory reforms, so that the proletariat would remain quiescent? Mission accomplished. It is not a matter of a half-victory for the proletariat, but of an almost total defeat, in which the “proletarian experience” was almost non-existent, because there was not, so to speak, any direct confrontation, any alignment of proletarians around a position opposed to capitalism. They never stopped supporting the democratized state, even at times against the parties, which they accused of “treason”<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Translator’s footnote: i.e. The movement of occupation of workplaces and campuses during May ’68.

<sup>19</sup> Translator’s footnote: The translator disagrees with this estimation; c.f. the account of the TAP strike in Portugal: Anti-Fascism or Anti-Capitalism, Root and Branch, 1976.

Neither in Italy in 1969, nor in Portugal in 1974-5, was there a “social war”. What is a social war if not a head-on struggle between classes, calling into question the foundations of society – wage labor, exchange, the state? There was not even the beginning of a confrontation between classes, and between the proletariat and the state in Italy and Portugal. In 1969, the strike movements sometimes spread into riots but not every riot is the beginning of the revolution. The conflicts born of demands could become violent and could even provoke the beginning of a struggle against the forces of Order. But the degree of violence does not indicate the content of the struggle. In battling the police, the workers continued to believe no less in a leftwing government. They called for a “real democratic state” against the conservative forces supposedly dominating it.

Explaining the failure of the “social war” by the presence of the C.P.s is as serious as attributing everything to the absence of the party. Should one ask whether the German revolution miscarried in 1919 because of the S.P.D. and the unions? Or should one rather ask why the S.P.D. and the unions existed, why the workers continued to support them? One must begin from inside the proletariat.

Certainly, it is comforting to see a book which presents the C.P. as one of the pillars of capitalism undergo a wide distribution. But this success is ambiguous. If capital no longer has any all-encompassing thought, or even no thinkers at all (which is in any case incorrect), the S.I. thinks well enough in its place, but badly for the proletariat, as we shall see. Sanguinetti finishes by reasoning in capitalist terms. In fact, he has constructed an analysis such as a capitalist who had assimilated vulgar marxism would have. It is the bourgeoisie who speak of revolution where there is none. For them, occupied factories and barricades in the streets are the beginning of a revolution. Revolutionary marxism does not take the appearance for reality, the moment for the whole. The “heaviness” of marxism is preferable to a lightness without content. But let us leave the readers to choose according to what motivates their reading.

The S.I. has succeeded at an exercise in style: the final verdict for a group that mocked the cult of style in a style-less world. It has come in the end to play capitalist, in every sense of the word. Its brilliance is unimpaired, but it has nothing else left but brilliance. The S.I. gives good advice to capitalists and bad advice to proletarians, to whom it proposes nothing but councilism.

Veridique rapport contains two ideas: (i) the governmental participation of the C.P. is indispensable to Italian capitalism; (ii) the revolution is the workers’ councils. The second idea is false, the first one true; capitalists like Agnelli have also expressed it. In a word, Sanguinetti manages to grasp the totality as a bourgeois and nothing more.

He wanted to pass himself off as an enlightened bourgeois: he has succeeded all too well. He has beaten himself at his own game.

## **Recuperation**

At the same moment, Jaime Semprun, the author of *La Guerre sociale au Portugal*, published a *Precis de recuperation*. Here is what the S.I. once said about “recuperation”:

It is quite normal that our enemies should come to use us partially... just like the proletariat, we do not pretend to be unexploitable under present conditions. (I.S. #9. p. 4).

The vital concepts undergo at one and the same time the truest and most lying uses... because the struggle of critical reality against apologetic spectacle leads us to a struggle over words, a struggle the more bitter as the words are more central. It is not an authoritarian purge, but the coherence of a

concept's use in theory and in practical life which reveals its truth. (I.S. #10, p. 82).

The counterrevolution does not take up revolutionary ideas because it is malign or manipulative, let alone short of ideas, but because revolutionary ideas deal with real problems with which the counterrevolution is confronted. It is absurd to launch into a denunciation of the enemy's use of revolutionary themes or notions. Today, all terms, all concepts are perverted. The subversive movement will only reappropriate them by its own practical and theoretical development.

Since the end of the 19th century, capitalism and the workers' movement have engendered a fringe of thinkers who take up revolutionary ideas only so as to empty them of their subversive content and adapt them to capital. The bourgeoisie has, by nature, a limited vision of the world. It must call on the vision of the class, the proletariat, which is the bearer of another project. This phenomenon has been amplified since marxism has been officially recognized as having public usefulness. During the first period, capital drew from it a sense of the unity of all relations and of the importance of the economy (in the sense in which Lukacs rightly said that capitalism produces a fragmented vision of reality). But to the extent that capitalism comes to dominate the whole of life, this vision – broadly speaking, that of old-fashioned economic vulgar marxism – is inadequate to its complexity and to the extension of conflicts to all its levels. During the second period, the one we are living in today, determinist orthodox marxism has been rejected by the bourgeoisie itself. At the universities, it was good fun to shrug one's shoulders at Capital fifty years ago: around 1960, it became permissible to find "interesting ideas" in it, the more so as they were being "applied" in the U.S.S.R.... To be in fashion today, it is enough to say that Capital is in the rationalist and reductionist tradition of Western philosophy since Descartes, or even since Aristotle. The new official marxism is not an axis; instead one puts a little bit of it everywhere. It serves to remind one of the "social" character of all practice: the "recuperation" of the S.I. is only a particular case.

One of the natural channels of this evolution is the university, since the apparatus of which it is a part backs a considerable part of the research on the modernization of capital. Official "revolutionary" thought is the scouting party of capital. Thousands of appointed functionaries criticize capitalism from every direction.

Modernism expresses the social crisis of which the crisis of the proletariat is only an aspect. Out of the limits which the subversive movement encounters at every step, modernism makes its objectives. It serves in particular to justify immediate reformism at the social level. In fact, traditional working class reformism no longer needs justification inasmuch as it has become the rule. The reformism of customs and daily life still needs to be theorized, both against the revolutionary movement from which issues the bias toward it, and against backward capitalist fractions which reject liberties that are nonetheless inoffensive to capital. Modernism thus gets developed because it helps capital to free itself from the fetters on capitalist liberty. The reformism of the everyday is still in its ascendant phase, as economic and working class reformism was seventy years ago.

The common trait of all modernism is the taking up of revolutionary theory by halves; basically its approach is that of "marxism" as against Marx. Its axiom is to call, not for revolution, but for liberation from a certain number of constraints. It wants the maximum of freedom within the existing society. Its critique will always be that of the commodity and not of capital, of politics and not of the state, of totalitarianism and not of democracy. Is it by accident that its historical representative, Marcuse, came from a Germany forced to turn away from the radical aspirations revealed in 1917-21?



It is conceivable to denounce deformations in revolutionary theory in order to make things absolutely precise – on the condition, however, that there is more than just a denunciation. In Semprun's book, there is not an ounce of theory to be found. Let us take two examples. In his critique of G. Guégan<sup>20</sup>, Semprun shows what he considers important. Why demolish this personage? To demarcate oneself, even with violent language, has no meaning unless one puts oneself at a higher level. Semprun spreads Guégan's life over several pages. But if it is really necessary to talk about Guégan, there is something that must be got straight concerning Cahiers du futur (Future Notebooks), the journal he edited. If the first issue was uselessly pretentious, the second, devoted to the counter-revolution, is particularly detestable. It presents the fact that the counter-revolution feeds on the revolution as a paradox, takes pleasure in pointing out the mix-up without explaining anything, as something to revel in amid complacently morbid drawings, and sends everybody into a tailspin. This (intentional ?) derision for all revolutionary activity mixes in a little more and fosters a feeling of superiority among those who have understood because they have been there: "That's where revolution leads..." (read: "That's what I was when I was a militant...") One can only dream of what the S.I. in its prime might have written about this.

Semprun also shows how Castoriadis<sup>21</sup> has innovated in taking it upon himself to "recuperate" his own past revolutionary texts, striving to make them unreadable by heaping them with prefaces and footnotes. This is amusing at first sight, but becomes less so when one knows what the S.I. owes to *Sou B*. Semprun even shows condescension toward Chaulieu's "marxist" period. The ultra-left was indeed dry as dust, but not enough to stop Debord from joining it. Whether one likes it or not, this is falsification: one amuses the reader while making him forget what the S.I.'s bankruptcy owes to Chaulieu before he went bankrupt himself.

In these two cases as in others, individuals are judged by their attitude, not by their theoretical evolution, from which one might profit. Semprun presents us with a gallery of moral portraits. He does not analyze, he judges. He pillories a number of assholes who stole from the S.I.. Criticizing these attitudes, he is himself nothing but an attitude.

Like every moralistic practice, this one leads to some monstrosities. The most striking is the aggravation of the practice of organization already mentioned in relation to The Real Split... As Debord's new bodyguard, Semprun settles accounts with former members of the S.I.. Reading these works, the uninitiated wouldn't think that the S.I. was ever much of anything. Busy with his self-destruction, Debord now unleashes a sectarianism which reveals his fear of the world. Semprun's style can thus only insult everything that comes within its scope and which is not Debord. He is nothing but a demarcation. He does not know either how to approve or to scorn. Of radical criticism, he has retained only the contempt.

## Spectacle

The S.I. always valued its trademark and did its own publicity. One of its great weaknesses was wanting to appear to be without weaknesses, without faults, as if it had developed the Superman within itself. Today it is no more than that. As a critique of traditional groups and of militantism, the S.I. played at being an International, turning politics into derision. The rejection of the pseudo-serious militant who achieves only the spirit of the cloister today serves to evade serious problems. Voyer<sup>22</sup> practices derision only to

<sup>20</sup> Translator's footnote: Guégan was the manager and the real founder of Champ Libre Publications until he was fired in 1975. He is now a fashionable figure in literary and avant-garde circles.

<sup>21</sup> Translator's footnote: Cardan - Chaulieu's real name. (tr)

<sup>22</sup> Translator's footnote: Jean-Pierre Voyer, author of "Reich: How to Use" (available from Bureau of Public

become derisory himself. The proof that the S.I. is finished is that it continues in this form. As a critique of the spectacle, the S.I. shows off its bankruptcy by making a spectacle of itself, and ends up as the opposite of what it was born for.

For this reason, the S.I. continues to be appreciated by a public in desperate need of radicality of which it retains only the letter and the tics. Born from a critique of art, the S.I. winds up being used (despite and because of itself) as a work of literature. One takes pleasure in reading the S.I. or its successors, or the classics which it appreciated, as others take pleasure in listening to the Doors. In the period when the S.I. was really searching and self-searching, when the practice of derision clothed real theoretical and human progression, when humor did not serve merely as a mask, the S.I.'s style was much less fluid and facile than that of these current writings. The rich text resists its author as well as its readers. The text which is nothing but style flows smoothly.

The S.I. contributed to the revolutionary common good, and its weaknesses also have become fodder for a public of monsters, who are neither workers nor intellectuals, and who do nothing. Barren of practice, of passion, and often of needs, they have nothing between them but psychological problems. When people come together without doing anything, they have nothing in common but their subjectivity. The S.I. is necessary to them; in its work, they read the ready-made theoretical justification for their interest in these relations. The S.I. gives them the impression that the essential reality resides in immediate intersubjective relations, and that revolutionary action consists in developing a radicality at this level, in particular in escaping from wage labor, which coincides with their existence as déclassés. The secret of this radicality consists of rejecting everything that exists (including the revolutionary movement) so as to oppose to it whatever seems farthest away from it (even if this has nothing revolutionary about it). This pure opposition has nothing revolutionary about it but the words. The life-style has its rules, which are just as constricting as those of the "bourgeois" world. Most often, bourgeois values are inverted in apologetics for not working, for marginal existence, for everything that seems to transgress. Leftism makes apologetics for the proletariat as something positive in this society: the pro-situs glorify themselves (as proletarians) as pure negation. As for the ones who have some theoretical substance, their watchword is always the "critique of the S.I.", a critique which is impossible for them because it would be also the critique of their milieu.

The vigor of the S.I. was not in its theory but in a theoretical and practical exigency which its theory only partially recovered, which it helped to locate. The S.I. was the affirmation of the revolution. Its rise coincided with a period when it was possible to think that there would be a revolution soon. It was not equipped to survive past that period. It was successful as the self-critique of a social stratum incapable of making the revolution by itself, and which denounced this stratum's own pretensions (as represented for example, by leftism which wants workers to be led by "conscious" drop-outs from the middle class).

### **Radical Subjectivity**

The S.I. had in relation to classical revolutionary marxism (of which Chaulieu was a good example) the same function, and the same limits, as Feuerbach had in relation to Hegelianism. To escape from the oppressive dialectic of alienation/ objectification, Feuerbach constructed an anthropological vision which placed Man, and in particular love and the senses, at the center of the world. To escape from the economism and factory-fetishism (usinisme) of the ultra-left; the S.I. elaborated a vision of which human relations were the center and which is consonant with "reality", is materialist, if these relations are given their full weight so that they include production, labor. Feuerbachian anthropology

prepared the way for theoretical communism such as Marx was able to synthesize during his own time, via the transition of the 1844 Manuscripts. In the same way, the theory of “situations” has been integrated into a vision of communism of which the S.I. was incapable such as is shown today in *Un monde sans argent*<sup>23</sup>.

For the same reason, Debord read Marx in the light of Cardan, considering the “mature” Marx to have been submerged in political economy, which is false. Debord’s vision of communism is narrow in comparison to the whole problem. The S.I. did not see the human species and its reconciliation with Nature. It was limited to a very Western, industrial urban universe. It located automation wrongly. It spoke of “dominating nature” which also bespeaks the influence of *S ou B*. When it dealt with material conditions, in relation to the organization of space, it was still a matter of “relations between people”. *S ou B* was limited by the enterprise, the S.I. by subjectivity. It went as far as it could, but on its original trajectory. Theoretical communism is more than a revolutionary anthropology. The 1844 Manuscripts assimilate Feuerbach’s vision by putting Man back into the totality of his relations.

The S.I. owed a great deal to the texts of the young Marx, but it failed to see one of their important dimensions. While other communists rejected political economy as a justification of capitalism, Marx superseded it. The comprehension of the proletariat presupposes a critique of political economy. The S.I. had much more in common with Moses Hess and Wilhelm Weitling, with Feuerbach and Stirner, the expression of a moment in the emergence of the proletariat. The period which produced them (1830-48) greatly resembles the one in which we live. Putting forward a radical subjectivity against a world of commodity objects and reified relationships, the S.I. expressed an exigency which was fundamental, yet had to be superseded. Becker, a friend of Weitling’s, wrote in 1844:

We want to live, to enjoy, to understand everything... communism concerns itself with matter only so as to master it and subordinate it to the mind and spirit...

A large part of current discussions reproduces these pre-1848 debates. Like Invariance today, Feuerbach made humanity into a being which permits the breaking of isolation:

Isolation signifies a narrow and constricted life, while community, by contrast, signifies an infinite and free one.

Though he conceptualized the relation between Man and Nature (reproaching Hegel for having neglected it), Feuerbach made the human species into a being over and above social life: “The unity of I and Thou is God.” The 1844 Manuscripts gave the senses their place in human activity. By contrast, Feuerbach made sensualism (sic) into the primary problem:

The new philosophy rests on the truth of feelings. In love, and in a more general way, in his feelings, every man affirms the truth of the new philosophy.

The theoretical renaissance around 1968 renewed the old concept within the same limits. Stirner opposed the “will” of the individual to Hess’s moralism and Weitling’s denunciation of “egoism”, just as the S.I. opposed revolutionary pleasure to militant self-sacrifice. The insistence on subjectivity testifies to the fact that proletarians have not yet succeeded in objectifying a revolutionary practice. When the revolution remains at the stage of desire, it is tempting to make desire into the pivot of the revolution.

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<sup>23</sup> *Le communisme: un monde sans argent* [Communism: A World without Money] (3 vols.) by Organization des jeunes Travailleurs Revolutionnaires. Paris, 1975.