

“The SI [Situationist International] must be counted as a basic reference point for any future revolutionary movement. The SI’s powerful critique of the revolutionary herself may have degenerated in the period of counter-revolution into a dead-end addiction to navel-gazing; but this cannot obscure the continued necessity of engaging with their arguments. Despite the attention the SI receives, and the attempts over the years by various toss-pots to claim them for modern art or cultural studies, the SI remains in some sense irrecuperable.”

In this pamphlet:

p1 “Critique of the Situationist International”
by Gilles Dauvé (a.k.a. Jean Barrot) (1979)

p26 ... “Translators Introduction to Critique of the
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from *Aufheben* #6 (1997)

MAKING SENSE OF THE SITUATIONISTS



Critique of the Situationist International

by Gilles Dauvé (a.k.a. Jean Barrot) (1979)

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 recompose 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

Local Chapters in the Spectacle of Decomposition and *On The Poverty of Berkeley Life* by Chris Shutes are two of the most interesting products of the American situationists.

13 Of course, these second wave situationists thought that their focus on character etc. was indeed carrying theory and the revolution forward. This was part of their tendency to reduce revolution to essentially a problem of consciousness: their own consciousness.

14 For all the SI's interesting critique of 'roles' Knabb seems to have never broken from the role of 'the theorist'!

15 *Re-Fuse: Further Dialectical Adventures into the Unknown* London: Combustion, 1978, p. 36 This is an interesting British situationist text but it should be noted the author stopped distributing this text in 1980 and does not necessarily hold to every opinion expressed within it.

16 Detroit: Black & Red, 1974. A new edition of this important book is to be published soon.

17 The title of the earlier pamphlet version of Barrot's article was in fact given to it by the publisher, though nowhere in it does Barrot use the term 'situationism' (see below).

18 For more on *Sou B* and indeed on the SI, see the article on 'Decadence' in *Aufheben* 3, Summer 1994.

19 All this is dealt with well in Barrot & Martin's *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*.

20 *What is Situationism? A Reader*, p. 35.

21 Barrot acknowledges the SI here but references *The Society of the Spectacle* rather than Vaneigem's book.

22 *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 24.

23 Its not that the insights of the SI completely escaped being turned into an ideology (see below), nor are we accepting Debord and Sanguinetti's all too easy dismissal of such ideologization as "pro-situ" and thus 'nothing to do with us'. On the basis of *The Veritable Split* some loyal situationists have been ideologically against 'situationism' just as some have been militantly anti-militant. The issue is not about whether one should use the term "situationism" or not, but about whether one can use the SI's ideas for revolutionary purposes. As *The Veritable Split*, itself expresses it, "it is not ... a question of the theory of the SI but of the theory of the proletariat" (p. 14).

24 In his Introduction, the editor describes the authors as "entrepreneurs whose article helped make SI ideas into a saleable commodity" (p. 1). This claim is contradicted in the Reader itself by the account of how the text was never published by its authors but distributed in typescript form among a few people mainly in the Leeds area. A Glasgow group then produced it as a pamphlet and now the editor uses it alongside Barrot's piece to spice up an otherwise bankrupt product.

25 See *Re-Fuse* p. 39

26 The attempts at academic criticism and co-optation following the death of Debord in 1994 are detailed by T.J. Clark & Donald Nicholson-Smith in their article *Why art can't kill the Situationist International* in the art journal(!) *October*, 1997.

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*, [1] 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. [2]

True and False

What are the consequences for the revolutionary movement of "the function of social appearances in modern capitalism" (I.S. 10, p. 79) ? As Marx and Dejacque [3] 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 "propaganda". [4]

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,

Notes

1 See R. Vienét (1968). *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement*, France, May ‘68. Autonomia, New York/ Rebel Press, London, 1992.

2 Guy Debord (1967) *The Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 4. Black and Red, 1983

3 Raoul Vaneigem (1967) *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 139. London: Rebel Press/ Left Bank Books, 1994.

4 Ibid., p. 131.

5 Ibid., p. 116.

6 Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981.

7 (Public Secrets p. 142) One sees in Knabb’s life-story a tendency to rationalize and politically justify his own personal interests. His own attraction to ‘neo-religious trips’, in particular Zen Buddhist practices, is turned into a question for all situationists and revolutionaries in his article ‘The Realization and Suppression of Religion’. Luckily, this urge to politicize his hobbies didn’t result in a text calling for the *Realization and Suppression of Outdoor Pursuits*

8 For a critical appraisal of the London RTS/ ‘Social Justice’ event on 12 April this year, see the spoof news-sheet Schnooze, available from Brighton Autonomists, c/o Prior House, 6 Tilbury Place, Brighton BN2 2GY.

9 Another, and in many ways better, text that tries to use the work of Reich to aid revolutionary politics is Maurice Brinton’s *The Irrational in Politics*, Solidarity (1971).

10 However, the SI’s self-dissolution is not without merits.. The SI resisted the “Leninist” temptation to “recruit and grow” as an organization on the basis of the notoriety they had won since ‘68. Such a quantitative expansion would have covered up the qualitative crisis in the organization. However in ending it the way they did the last members collaborated in the growth of the legend of the SI. (See *The Veritable Split in the International* (1972) by G. Debord & G. Sanguinetti. London: BM Chronos, 1985.)

11 Daniel Denevert had a quite prominent role in the 1970s situationist scene, detailed by Knabb (e.g., pp. 126-7, 129-31). They carried the ‘pursuit of individual autonomy’ and attacks on people’s ‘characterological’ complicity within the spectacle to an extreme point before finally sending out a set of “*Lettres sur l’amité*” in which they discussed their recent experiences on the terrain of political and personal relationships and declared a “friendship strike” of indefinite duration (Knabb, p. 136). We hear that Daniel Denevert did eventually give himself over to an even more isolated way of resisting this world, a way that opens one to ‘one of modern society’s increasingly sophisticated forms of control over people’s lives’: psychiatrists and mental hospitals.

12 ‘This deliberate narrowing of the scope of critical inquiry marks a retreat from an historical plane of analysis... In the Knabbist cosmos, which is surprisingly impervious to historical change, the theorist becomes the “experiencing subject,” who develops endlessly through a sequence of subjective “moments,” arriving finally at the ultimate goal of “realization.”’ (At Dusk: The Situationist Movement in Historical Perspective by D. Jacobs & C. Winks, Berkeley, 1975). Knabb quotes this critique as part of his situ honesty. He could have made a more interesting and less narcissistic book by including longer extracts from the writings of other American situationists or - as with these authors - ex-situationists. For example, *Two*

and reggae, by Dave and Stuart Wise.[24] The book was an opportunity for the editor to present to an English-speaking audience either as yet untranslated SI texts, other critiques of the situationists from within the revolutionary movement, or some of the largely unavailable 70s Anglophone situationist texts. Instead, most of the pieces are by academics and easily available elsewhere. The articles that have been slung together here mostly concern the SI's art heritage (the editor's own obsession) and are not worth reading.

The recurring question of the reception and recuperation of the SI

The vehement attacks on the "pro-situ" followers of the SI was part of a conscious attempt to prevent the ideas of the SI becoming an -ism: to escape the ideologization of their insights. Of course these attempts have not been completely successful; but this is only to be expected. Within academia, the hegemony of the postmodernist situ-vampires is one example of this. The fact that such recuperation has taken place should lead loyal situationists like Knabb to be a bit more critical of his beloved theory. Some pro-situ French fans of Voyer held that the economy doesn't exist - that it is all just ideology![25] This very "postmodern" and very preposterous notion was in this case then not developed by academic recuperators like Baudrillard, but by loyal situationists. Will Knabb now make the connection between the theory and its ideologization?

Why review these books? We didn't like *What is Situationism?* A Reader. We had reservations about the Knabb book, but felt it illustrated something about the post-SI situationist scene. The books' publication is evidence of the continued interest in the SI, and the SI must be counted as a basic reference point for any future revolutionary movement. The SI's powerful critique of the revolutionary herself may have degenerated in the period of counter-revolution into a dead-end addiction to navel-gazing; but this cannot obscure the continued necessity of engaging with their arguments. Despite the attention the SI receives, and the attempts over the years by various toss-pots to claim them for modern art or cultural studies, the SI remains in some sense irrecoverable. The continued attempts by organized knowledge either to dismiss or co-opt the SI [26] itself provides evidence of the enduring antagonism of their ideas, as does the conscious echo of their approach in a number of contemporary struggles.

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 *Sou 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 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 *Banalites de base* [5] 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 *Sou B* [6] 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* [7] for the S.I.).

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 superseded. 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

there is a separation between the work-place and the community. [19]

Finally we would agree with the translator that Barrot underestimates Vaneigem. For Barrot, "Vaneigem was the weakest side of the SI, the one which reveals all its weaknesses. The positive utopia [which Vaneigem describes in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* "is revolutionary as demand, as tension, because it cannot be realized within this society: it becomes derisory when one tries to live it today" [20]. But that is exactly the point; *The Revolution of Everyday Life* is a revolutionary book because it connects to a tension between what one desires and knows as possible, but what cannot fully exist short of insurrection. That Vaneigem totally 'lost it' after the SI and that "Vaneigemism" became more and more preposterous as capital responded to the upsurge in class struggle of the 60s and 70s with crisis and mass unemployment does not deny that there are still important insights in his book. There is also an irony in Barrot's critical attitude here. As mentioned above, it was Vaneigem who most cogently developed the critique of "the militant". The original foreword to *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement* opens with a critique of "the militant attitude" which echoes Vaneigem's argument almost exactly:

"The militant attitude is indeed counter-revolutionary, in so far as it splits the individual into two, separating his needs, his real individual and social needs, the reasons why he cannot stand the present world, from his action, his attempt to change this world. The militant refuses to admit that he is in fact revolutionary because he needs to change his own life as well as society in general. He represses the impulse which made him turn against society. He submits to revolutionary action as if it were external to him..." (p. 7) [21]

The criticism of -isms

It is not incidental to understanding what the SI were about that they rejected the term "situationism" and all who used it. The critique of "-isms" is well expressed by Vaneigem: "The world of -isms ... is never anything but a world drained of reality, a terribly real seduction by falsehood".[22] To make an -ism of a set of practices and their accompanying theory is to render them as an ideology. The rejection of -isms is part of the rediscovery of the anti-ideological current in the work of Marx, which Marxism, in becoming an ideology, has repressed.

It therefore seems no coincidence that the edited Reader uses this rejected term in its title.[23] It indicates where the editor locates himself in relation to the SI - as someone making a career out of snidely attacking them. This informs the selection of articles in the rest of the book. The only worthwhile piece apart from Barrot is 'The end of music', a critique of punk

The key point made by Barrot is that the analysis of the SI, as exemplified in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, remains at the level of circulation, 'lacking the necessary moment of production, of productive labour' (*What is Situationism? A Reader*, p. 28). The great strength of the SI was to show how alienation existed not just in production but in "everyday life", and hence in consumption. But, as Barrot suggests, the works of the SI leave the impression that a further analysis of production is unnecessary. In doing so, Debord "reduces capitalism to its spectacular dimension alone" (*Ibid.*, p., 28). The spectacle is a sort of shorthand for all the social relations of contemporary capital. But it is not obvious from reading Debord's pithy exegesis quite how "the spectacle" can cover and distinguish as many forms of production and circulation relations as does 'capital'. Hence, though it is sometimes presented as the modern Capital, *The Society of the Spectacle* falls short of this ambition.

However, if *The Society of the Spectacle* is not the modern Capital, let's admit that it is one of the few books that could make that claim with any expectation of it being believed. As Barrot puts it, the SI analysed the revolutionary problem

'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 superficial appearance. The SI 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.'

(*What is Situationism? A Reader*, p. 28.)

But there are other merits to *The Society of the Spectacle* - for example, its treatment of the historical workers' movement in "The Proletariat as Subject and as Representation" is exceptional and its analysis of time and space adds to Marx. Barrot's overall critique is perhaps just a little too dismissive, but is possibly an understandable and necessary moment of reaction to the way *The Society of the Spectacle* has been treated by others.

Barrot notes that the SI's background in art/anti-art leaves its mark in their theory. They generalize from the anti-capitalist strengths of non-wage-earning social layers to labour in general, for example. He also observes that they borrowed *S ou B*'s councilism and democracy far too uncritically. They were ignorant of the Italian left and hence of Bordiga's critique of councilism. As Bordiga argued, with its emphasis on forms of revolutionary organization and on workers' control, councilism neglects that the content can still be capitalist. Workers in control of their own work-place are still workers - are still alienated - if the work-place remains an enterprise and

"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" á la Cardan, it ended by adopting the problematic of "participation" á 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 Véritable Scission* [8], 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 [9] 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. 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 (#9, 1964) [10] 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

with and applied loyally for the rest of his life. There has been little subsequent development of the pioneering SI analyses, either by Knabb or anyone else. Debord himself, post 1968, was more concerned with his reputation than with developing new theory. Loyal followers of the SI seemed to live off past glories; carrying forward the authentic SI project seemed to them to be a matter of repeating the ideas rather than superseding them where necessary, as the SI superseded previous revolutionary theory.[13] Hence, Knabb’s ‘The Joy of Revolution’ is not meant to be original; rather it is a somewhat didactic but readable introduction to the ‘common sense’ of non-hierarchical revolutionary theory, intended for readers not otherwise convinced. Although, within these terms, the article has its merits, some readers, like us, will find Knabb’s treatment of democracy far too uncritical - another unchallenged inheritance of the SI.

If the ideas of the SI are more or less complete, as Knabb seems to believe, then the most important thing is to get them across. What is striking in Knabb’s account of his activity is how much of it was text-centred:[14] his ‘interventions’ were mostly writings, posters and leaflets. Within this ‘pedantic precision fetishism’ [15] it was essential to Knabb to choose the correct words, even if this meant writing and re-writing his leaflets repeatedly till he got it right. Hence his short leaflet in response to the Gulf War took almost two months to write and wasn’t distributed until the campaign against the war was almost over. Other documents in the collection express the same loyalty to the insights of the SI. Knabb’s response to the LA riot of 1992 was not a fresh analysis, learning from the new expressions of anti-capitalist practice of the uprising. Instead, he issued a new translation of the classic SI text “Watts 1965: The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy”!

The worst feature of Knabb’s loyalty is his Debord-like lumping together of all the different critics of the SI. In ‘The Blind Men and the Elephant’, Knabb juxtaposes a number of critical quotations on the SI, not just from shallow bourgeois commentators, but also from revolutionaries. Among them is a critical comment from Barrot & Martin’s *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*. [16] The inclusion of the quote demonstrates not Barrot & Martin’s dogmatic refusal to comprehend, but Knabb’s. Barrot’s critique, expounded at length elsewhere, is, from a revolutionary perspective, perhaps the most useful critical analysis of the SI published to date.

The critique of the SI

The Barrot article known to many readers as ‘What is Situationism’ is republished in *What is Situationism? A Reader* under its original title ‘Critique of the Situationist International’. [17] Along with the article is a useful introductory piece by the translator which critically traces the SI’s influences in the form of Socialism or Barbarism (*S ou B*), [18] as well as the currents which the SI neglected to its detriment - notably the Italian left.

the personal/political dichotomy, what these post-SI situationists showed in totally politicizing their personal relations was that they themselves were the most obsessively one-sided politicians!

As illustrated in *Public Secrets*, the obsession with personal relations seems to have substituted itself for a proper concern with collective relations - how a group in struggle relates to the wider proletariat. Did all this meticulous navel-gazing at the level of personal relations really help those involved to engage more effectively in the class struggle as has been claimed? It would seem that those who indulged in this kind of self-analysis have not intervened any more effectively in the class struggle than the rest of us. It therefore comes as no surprise that SI-influence proponents of 'friendship strikes', [11] personal breaks and other forms of character analysis such as Knabb now look back upon this period with some regret and embarrassment (*Public Secrets*, p. 133).

Knabb as a loyal situationist

Knabb went through the pre-hippy scene and anarchism before he discovered the writings of the SI. After Knabb had - in his own words - "become a situationist" (p. vi), he and others produced 'On the Poverty of Hip Life' (1972), an analysis of what was valid in the hippy movement as well some of its profound limitations:

'If the hippie knew anything he knew that the revolutionary vision of the politicians didn't go far enough. Although the hip lifestyle was really only a reform movement of daily life, from his own vantage point the hippie could see that the politico had no practical critique of daily life (that he was "straight")'.
(*Public Secrets*, p. 177)

And yet, because hippies understood alienation as simply a matter of the wrong perception, their own innovations were easily recuperated as further roles, giving new life to the spectacle:

"But as culture such a critique only serves to preserve its object. The counterculture, since it fails to negate culture itself, can only substitute a new oppositional culture, a new content for the unchanging commodity form..." (*Ibid.*, pp. 176-7).

However this early 70s stuff applying situationist critique to wider movements gives way by the mid 70s to increasingly introverted 'theorizing' [12] about theorizing'. Two of the more recent pieces in the Knabb collection, 'The Joy of Revolution' and his interesting autobiography 'Confessions of a Mild-Mannered Enemy of the State' place pieces like these in context. Knabb's discovery of the SI's texts provided him with the basic theory which he stuck

by Camatte in the P.C.I. [11] (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 "management-ist" illusions led it to distort the facts concerning Algeria after Boumedienne's coup d'état :

"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 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 bridgeheads 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

Reduction of the political to the personal

The second wave of situationists, in particular, held that in the same way that we should give expression to our desires rather than suppress them--since it is our desires that are the motor of our struggle against alienation--so it is necessary to realize the political in the personal. This wasn’t simply an attack on inconsistency in one’s personal relations, but an argument that sorting yourself out could help you in your quest to sort out the world. The argument went: how can one criticize workers for not breaking with capital if not questioning one’s own collusion in alienated personal relations?

Those who made this claim were adamant that it wasn’t an argument for the revolutionary value of therapy, and that therapy was not some kind of solution. But they certainly made use of certain ideas from therapy by drawing on the work of Wilhelm Reich. [9] Reich’s influence is evident both in Vaneigem’s work and in the practices of Knabb and his sometime cohorts. Public Secrets includes a piece by Voyer, ‘Reich: How to Use’, which argues that character (in Reich’s sense) is the form taken by the individual’s complicity in the spectacle. To end this complicity, Knabb and others continued the SI’s practice of breaking, sometimes using an individual’s character as their rationale. In circulated letters announcing breaks, they detailed each other’s limitations such as superficiality and pretentiousness, both in understanding the SI and in personal relations.

Breaking has a long history in the SI. As *What is Situationism?* reiterates tediously, the SI’s origins lay in an art/anti-art movement. Arguably, then, as the SI moved beyond art/anti-art to a revolutionary position, breaking was a necessary part of defining itself: arty-types were seen as involved in a completely different project and hence had to be expelled. The book also relates how, following further breaks, by the early 1970s the SI comprised just three people. The SI finally appears ludicrous in its preciousness and self-absorption.[10]

The same can be said of the breaks taking place amongst the second-wave situationists described and documented by Knabb. However, the history of breaks in this case seems less excusable, since Knabb and his comrades were not part of an emerging movement in the first place, but merely a minor scene. Their principled breaking appears to have been seen by them as a measure of their radicality. But the quest for “authenticity”, openness and honesty became important in its own right, and breaking became a compulsion. Defending the practice of breaking, Knabb says that the SI and their followers were doing “nothing more than choosing their own company” (Public Secrets, p. 132). Well that’s very nice for them, but in many struggles you can’t choose who is on your side; you may have to act alongside people you don’t like personally. Breaking helps draw clear lines, as Knabb says. But it comes across to us as self-indulgent purism, and the result is smaller and smaller groupuscules. What has that got to do with a revolutionary movement? Far from overcoming

during a period of upturn in interest in revolutionary ideas, how is it applied during times when the movement and its ideas are in retreat? Was Knabb burnt out after editing the Anthology, or were there really no struggles going on around him at that time in which he could usefully participate?

The revolutionary movement is so small today, and the threat of leftism so diminished, that it is easy to feel that pendulum of 'pleasure' versus commitment should swing the other way. To get even the most modest of activities going, it is sometimes all hands to the pump! Those comrades who don't turn up to meetings, pickets and demonstrations aren't for the most part inventing new, more creative, consistent and pleasurable forms of resistance. Instead, they are expressing their critique of routine and mundane activism merely by staying in bed or going to the pub.

Of course, there have been some relatively effective struggles in recent years which have come to characterize themselves in many ways as the very antithesis of the mode of 'the militant'. For example, recall the defence of Claremont Road in the No M11 Link Road Campaign, when 'activism' for most people consisted for a large part in simply occupying the street and so presented the opportunity for regular parties and other forms of hedonism. However, the anti-work 'strategy' of lying in bed till late in the morning despite all the barricading etc. that some people argued needed to be done led to some embarrassment when bailiffs and hundreds of riot police turned up to evict three houses and just walked in to find the occupants still asleep. Another example is the street party associated with Reclaim the Streets (RTS) groups. It seems undeniable that RTS get loads of people to mass actions against capital's beloved car-culture by billing such events as a "party". But, as has been noted elsewhere, a tension exists in such street parties in that some participants are satisfied with just the party aspect rather than the "political" point of the action. In the Claremont Road case, many of us agreed that we needed to get beyond the guilt-tripping work ethic proposed by some of the hard-core barricaders. But its simple inverse was not a practical solution.[8]

One of the sources for the situationists' rejection of compulsive "militant" activism is thesis 220 of *The Society of Spectacle* where Debord contends that 'the critique which goes beyond the spectacle must know how to wait'. The SI's rejection of the 'compromises of reformism' or 'pseudo-revolutionary common actions' seemed justified only months later when a near-revolutionary situation developed apparently from nowhere. But May '68 and its aftermath both confirmed the SI's analysis and pointed to its limits. If the situationists were waiting for another '68-type explosion, what they got instead was the retreat of radical subjectivity in the face of the re-assertion of capital's dead objectivity. We may prefer "life" to "survival", but in the face of capital's current counter-attack - unforeseen by the SI - even the most radical subjects must sometimes orient their activity around surviving.

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 [12] 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 radicalite*". 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. [13] 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 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 economic, 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 finds 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.

creativity and love etc.) and means (stereotyped, constrained and ritualized methods). Hence the SI slogan “boredom is always counter-revolutionary”.

Why does ‘the militant’ role occur? The answer of the SI and their followers was that the role of “the militant” had a certain psychological appeal. It offers certainty and safety to “the militant” herself. Most of us will have experienced how, when a struggle suddenly takes an unexpected turn (for example, the opportunity to occupy a building or get past the cops), the leftist ‘militant’ will hesitate or actively try to limit the situation. The role of ‘the militant’ creates a way of life, a routine, a structured mindset (guilt, duty etc.) such that change - including revolution itself - would be experienced as a threat to “the militant’s” sense of herself and her relation to the world.

Although we might perhaps sometimes recognize features of “the militant” in ourselves and our comrades, those of us in the non-Leninist revolutionary milieu will characteristically share certain basic assumptions which distinguish us from the leftist “militant”. We are not engaged in struggles to overthrow capitalism out of a sense of altruism, charity or self-sacrifice, but for ourselves as alienated proletarian beings, interdependent with others in our class for our liberation. As Vaneigem puts it, ‘I want to exchange nothing - not for a thing, not for the past, not for the future. I want to live intensely, for myself, grasping every pleasure firm in the knowledge that what is radically good for me will be good for everyone’. [5] Those on the left whose support for struggles elsewhere (whether in the ‘Third World’ or just for a group of local workers materially worse off than themselves) takes the place of their acknowledgement of and resistance to their own alienation might be said to not understand the nature of their own anti-capitalist impulses.

The historical vagaries of pleasure-seeking

The name of Ken Knabb will be known to many readers as the translator and editor of the most comprehensive collection of SI writings published in English, the Situationist International Anthology. [6] Public Secrets comprises for the most part a collection of nearly all Knabb’s writings and leaflets, going back to 1970. It therefore expresses the flavour of the self-analysing post-SI situationist scene in the 1970s.

Consistent with the rejection of the role of “the militant” and compulsive hack-like activism, the Knabb book, as an account of the ‘second wave’ of situationists in the United States, is notable for its lack of references to the routine meetings and ongoing activism familiar to many of us. For example, when he had finished editing the Situationist International Anthology, instead of involving himself in another struggle, Knabb took up rock-climbing.[7]

This puts us in mind of a common criticism of Vaneigem’s account of radical subjectivity: that it risks degenerating into bourgeois individualism. While it was a necessary attack on the sterility of the typical leftist approach

Whatever happened to the Situationists?

Review article:

“Public Secrets” by Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1997.

“What is Situationism? A Reader” edited by Stewart Home. Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996.

from *Aufheben* #6 (1997)

The Situationist International (SI) was one of the most important revolutionary groups in the last 30 years. As many of our readers will know, the SI developed revolutionary theory to explain the misery and hence revolutionary potential that exists even in supposedly affluent modern capitalist societies. Their analysis predicted the character of the May 1968 almost-revolution in France, and members of the SI participated enthusiastically in the events of that period.[1] We could pick out any number of their arguments to illustrate the SI’s vital contributions to revolutionary theory. Their most famous contribution is the concept of the spectacle, of course, an account of the contemporary form of alienation: ‘The spectacle is not an aggregate of images but a social relation among people, mediated by images’. [2] The SI are also known for their sharp analysis of the revolutionary movement itself. Perhaps no other revolutionary group has subjected the idea of what it means to be a revolutionary to such searching self-criticism.

The critique of ‘the militant’

The SI’s critique of ‘the militant’ is a key example of their self-questioning and self-criticism, which at its best can re-invigorate revolutionary struggle-both by helping comrades to re-evaluate their own practice, and by identifying what is wrong with those who call themselves revolutionaries but who are not.

The argument is that the way of life of ‘the militant’ is a role just as much as that of the ‘cop, executive or rabbi’. [3] ‘The militant’s’ supposedly revolutionary practices are in fact hackneyed and sterile, a set of compulsive duties and rituals. Against the dull compulsion of duty, sacrifice and routine, the writings of the SI offered a vision of revolutionary practice as involving risk-taking, spontaneity, pleasure etc.: roles should be restored ‘to the realm of play’. [4]

The role of ‘the militant’ can make “politics” appear boring and unattractive to the outsider. But more importantly, the demands of the role are contradictory to the needs of the subject inhabiting that role. In the world of ‘the militant’, ‘politics’ is a separate realm from that of pleasure, adventure and self-expression. The role, as a form of alienated activity, feeds vampire-like on real life; it represents a disjunction between ends (communism as free

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 [i.e. the ideology which glorifies their development for its own sake : Tr.], it had not understood the formidable subversive power of concretely communist measures. [14] 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 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 practiced 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*. [15] 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 re-unified 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 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 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 :

errors of the councilist type; as early as 1918 the Abstentionists were criticizing the *Ordine Nuovo* faction for its equation of socialism with workers’ management. They insisted from the start that the goal of the communist movement was the suppression of wage labor and commodity production, and that this could only be done by destroying the separation between units of production as enterprises. This makes them virtually unique among the revolutionary tendencies of the period. Such a clear view of the communist program emerges only rarely in the work of the rest of the “lefts” (e.g. in Sylvia Pankhurst’s 1920 critique of the newly-formed Communist Party of Ireland).

The Italian Left is thus revealed as a profoundly contradictory tendency, combining a rigorous and coherent grasp of marxian theory in the abstract, and a principled position on practical questions like parliamentarism and frontism, with an extreme voluntarism and substitutionism of the classic leninist variety. If the revolutionary wave had managed to advance further and establish a proletarian power in Germany, it is probable that the Italians would have overcome these confusions, just as the necessity of carrying out communist measures would have forced the German revolutionaries to abandon any vestiges of councilism and federalism. Instead, however, the majority of the European proletariat failed to break decisively with Social Democracy. Following the Bolshevik-assisted degeneration of the Comintern and the expulsion of the KAPD, the “Lefts”, both German and Italian, were reduced to tiny groups which attempted to maintain their theoretical coherence under the tremendous pressure of the counter-revolution. Here and there a few, like the French section of the international Communist Left around the journal *Bilan*, managed to preserve a considerable degree of clarity. Elsewhere the twin fetishisms of party and councils took hold. The elements of a theory which had never been fully united were further fragmented and turned into ideologies.

It was this wreckage that the S.I. confronted when it began its attempt to recover the legacy of the 1917-21 period. Under the circumstances it was perhaps understandable that the S.I. gravitated toward the councilist modernism of *S ou B* rather than attempting to penetrate the decidedly unattractive surface of the ICP or its by-products of the Italian Left tradition. Ironically, it was only after the S.I. had already reached an advanced stage of decomposition in late 1968 that other tendencies began to emerge which reclaimed the best aspects of the Italian Left and attempted to synthesize them with the German Left’s complementary contributions (e.g. *Revolution Internationale* and the journals *Le mouvement communiste* and *Negation*, both now defunct). By this time the S.I.’s theoretical inadequacies had themselves already merged into an ideology, “situationism”, which prevented the Situationists from comprehending the very crisis they had predicted years earlier. This process and its further evolution are well documented by Barrot in his critique.

In conclusion, it must be said that I am by no means in complete agreement with everything Barrot says about the S.I. or even its veterans and successors such as Sanguinetti and Semprun. I particularly consider Vaneigem to have been underestimated. However, I support the general argument of the critique--and most of its particular conclusions--wholeheartedly.

of the Party, it has defended it more vigorously than almost anyone else. From its contemporary manifestations, notably the “International Communist Party” (ICP), it would seem to be the last word in sectarian Leninist dogmatism, distinguished from the more hard-nosed varieties of Trotskyism only by its insistence on the capitalist nature of the USSR, China et al. This appearance, however, is deceptive. In order to understand the real significance of this current it is necessary first of all to understand its historical origins.

The “Italian Left” was born out of the revolutionary wave which swept Europe from 1917 to 1920. This places it in sharp contrast to both Trotskyism and *S ou B*, which came into being as attempts to comprehend and combat the counter-revolution which followed that wave. The “Left” began as a few hundred of the most resolute and clear sighted members of the Italian Socialist party (PSI) who came together in response to their party’s vacillations vis-a-vis the World War and the crisis of the workers’ movement in general. They formed themselves into the “Abstentionist Communist Fraction” of the PSI around positions very similar to those of the German Left. These were basically that capitalism had entered a severe crisis in which the reformist tactics of the pre-war period would no longer work (particularly participation in electoral politics, hence the label “Abstentionist”) and in which revolution had become the order of the day. The Left’s “abstentionism” at once set it apart from Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who attacked it, as well as its German counterpart, in the infamous pamphlet “Left-Wing” Communism : An Infantile Disorder. It was also distinguished from the Bolsheviks by its insistence, against Antonio Gramsci and the *Ordine Nuovo* faction, that the new communist party must be from the beginning constituted entirely of theoretically coherent militants who would make no concession to the backwardness of the rest of the class, and who would therefore make no alliances with the Social Democracy whether Right, Center or Left. This also gave it a commonality with the German Left, which insisted (c.f. Gorter’s Reply to Lenin) that the proletariat was now alone in its struggle and could no longer rely on even temporary alliances with the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie or with so-called workers’ parties’ which repressed strikes and shot workers in the name of democratic Order. However, unlike the German Left, the Italian communists had no real critique of the labor unions which (like orthodox Leninist) they regarded as being merely badly led. Nor did they make any distinction, at least much of the time, between the party, the political organizations of the consciously revolutionary minority, and the class organs like workers’ councils which, according to the German Left’s conceptions, would actually hold power in the proletarian dictatorship. For the Italian Left, at least as it emerged from Mussolini’s completion of the Italian counter-revolution, the organ of this dictatorship was the party and it alone.

But these crucial weaknesses aside, the Italian Left was distinguished from its German counterpart in positive ways as well. For one thing, it had a critique of democracy that was more sophisticated than that of the Germans who formed the KAPD [German Communist Party]. To be sure, this critique tended to be expressed in a rigid parliamentarism. But it did preserve the Italian Left from

“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 Summingup

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 SI’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*. [16] 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* [17] 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

State power from the bourgeoisie on behalf of the workers and thence necessarily evolves into a new ruling class;

(v) that capitalism as a whole had overcome its economic contradictions based on the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and therefore the contradiction between order-givers and order-takers had become the sole mainspring of revolution, whereby the workers would be driven to revolt and achieve self-management only by the intolerable boredom and powerlessness of their lives, and not by material deprivation.

This theory, which undoubtedly had the merit (not shared by Trotskyism since the War) of internal consistency, was strongly reinforced by the Hungarian uprising of 1956. Here, without the intervention of a Leninist "vanguard", workers' councils formed throughout the country in a matter of days and assumed the tasks of social management as well as those of armed resistance to the Russian invasion and the AVO military police. *S ou B* took the view that... over the coming years, all significant questions will be condensed into one : Are you for or against the action and the program of the Hungarian workers ? (Castoriadis, "*La Revolution proletarienne contre la bureaucratie*", cited in Castoriadis, "The Hungarian Source", Telos, Fall 1976).

Here the views of *S ou B* converged sharply with those of the remaining theorists of the German communist Left, such as Anton Pannekoek, whose Workers' Councils (1940) had reached very similar conclusions some fifteen years earlier (although it must be said in Pannekoek's defense that he would have taken a much more critical view of the program of the Hungarian councils, which called for parliamentary democracy and workers' management of the national economy, than did *S ou B*). At any rate, out of these two currents came the ideology of councilism, which dominated virtually the entire theoretical corpus of the revolutionary minorities between 1945 and 1970. I will not here attempt a critique of councilism or *S ou B*; this has been done quite ably by Barrot himself in *Eclipse and Reemergence of the Communist Movement*, and also by other groups such as the International Communist Current. Suffice it to say that Castoriadis went on from the conclusions outlined above to reject the whole of marxian theory (which he persisted in viewing through the distorting lenses of Kautsky and Lenin) and to re-found the revolutionary project entirely on the subjective discontent of workers, women, homosexuals, racial minorities, etc., who no longer form a class (the proletariat) opposed to the "order-givers" (capitalists and bureaucrats) but merely a mass of oppressed individuals. The revolution which they will carry out on this basis will be a matter of creating new organs of management which will federate and organize commodity exchange between themselves while supposedly "transforming" society. The similarity of these views to both American New Leftism of the SDS/Tom Hayden/Peoples' Bicentennial Commission variety and certain types of classical anarchism will be readily apparent : their disastrous political consequences will be even more so.

The "Italian Left" presents at first sight merely the thesis to which the radical anti-"marxism" of *S ou B* was the antithesis. Far from rejecting Lenin's theory

easily back into the stifling embrace of social-democracy.)

The significance of the text which follows for U.S. readers lies not only in the acuteness of its criticism of situationist theory and practice, but also in the historical context which it provides for the S.I., the tracing of the influences which formed and deformed it. The S.I., like any other historical phenomenon, did not appear in a vacuum. An appreciation of the S.I.'s much-vaunted originality is here balanced with a critical revelation of the currents, notably *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (*Sou B*), which were decisive in its evolution and conversely, of other currents, such as the classical "Italian" communist Left, which it ignored to its own disadvantage. In fact, in the book of which this text forms a chapter, the critique of the S.I. is preceded by analyses of both *Sou B* and the Italian Left. Since I have not seen these two chapters, I cannot provide a summary of their content here. However I will attempt to provide from my own knowledge and viewpoint a brief introduction to both currents.

Socialisme ou Barbarie was a journal started by a small group of militants who broke with mainstream Trotskyism shortly after World War II. The grounds for this break were several. Firstly there was the fact that the post-war economic crisis, and the war itself, had failed to provoke the revolutionary upheaval predicted by Trotsky. Secondly, there was the situation of the Soviet Union, where the bureaucracy had survived and had consolidated itself without the country having reverted to private capitalism. This also ran counter to Trotsky's predictions as did the extension of Soviet-style bureaucratic rule to the rest of Eastern Europe. Thirdly, there was the miserable internal life of the so-called "Fourth International" which by now constituted a mini-bureaucracy of its own, torn by sectarian rivalry and also thoroughly repressive.

From this practical and historical experience, *Sou B* commenced a profound questioning of "Marxism" the ideology which runs through the words of Kautsky, Lenin and Trotsky, appears as a caricature in the writings of Stalin and his hacks, and has part of its origin in the late work of Engels. Out of this questioning, *Sou B*'s leading theoretician, Cornelius Castoriadis, writing under the pseudonyms first of Pierre Chaulieu and later of Paul Cardan, derived the following general conclusions :

- (i) that the Soviet Union must now be regarded as a form of exploitative society called state--or bureaucratic-capitalist;
- (ii) that, in this, the Soviet Union was only a more complete variant of a process that was common to the whole of capitalism, that of bureaucratization;
- (iii) that, because of this, the contradiction between propertyless and property-owners was being replaced by the contradiction between "order-givers and order-takers" (*dirigeants et executants*) and that the private bourgeoisie was itself evolving via the concentration and centralization of capital into a bureaucratic class; [bog]
- (iv) that the advanced stage this process had reached in the Soviet Union was largely the result of the Leninist-Bolshevik conception of the Party, which seizes

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 *Sou B* : the practical verification of its theory, in fact the confirmation of its limits and the beginning of its getting tangled up. *La Veritable Scission...* asserts that the occupation movement [18] 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” [19].

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 left wing government. They called for a “real democratic state” against the conservative forces supposedly dominating it.

Translator’s introduction to “Critique of the Situationist International”

by Louis Michaelson

This text was written as a chapter of a much longer work, as yet unpublished, which is essentially a critical history of revolutionary theory and ideology, beginning with the work of Marx. The chapter’s subject, the Situationist International (S.I.) existed in Europe (and briefly the U.S.) between 1957 and 1971. Since 1968, the year of its essential disintegration, the S.I. has exerted a profound influence on the post-war generation of revolutionaries in Europe. This influence, as the following text indicates, has been far from purely beneficial. Certainly the work of the S.I. has become known in the U.S. largely through its epigones, the “pro-situ” groups which flourished briefly in New York and on the West Coast during the early 70’s. Such groups continue to exist and to come into being, here and in Europe. However, the older ones are vitiated of almost all content and significance by their persistent attachment to the most superficial and ideological aspects of the S.I.. The newer ones tend either to disintegrate very rapidly or else evolve towards a communist perspective often, regrettably, without retaining some of the best aspects of the S.I.’s thought which are absent from more orthodox revolutionary perspectives. By these I mean first of all the S.I.’s visionary quality, its attempt to bring the revolutionary project up to date with the post-war development of productive forces such as telecommunications, electronic data processing and automation. I also mean the S.I.’s restoration to this project of a critique of alienation and a concern with the freeing of individual producers and needs which were so prominent in the work of Marx and other communists during the mid-nineteenth century. These aspects were reflected in the S.I.’s assaults on art and urbanism and in its persistent assertion of the revolution as inaugurating a new way of life, a complete transformation of human activity, as well as a new mode of material production.

In the meantime, some original texts of the S.I., such as Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* and Vaneigem’s *Treatise on Living for the Use of the Young Generation*, have achieved a limited U.S. circulation as privately-printed editions, often very badly translated. In the last two years a not particularly representative sampling of the S.I.’s French language journal *Internationale Situationniste* has appeared in English under the title *Leaving the Twentieth Century*, poorly rendered and with an execrable commentary by an ex-member of the British section of the S.I.. In spite of this dissemination, the S.I.’s contributions have either been ignored or recuperated by the Left, which was briefly forced to acknowledge its existence during the late sixties because of its importance in the most coherent and aggressive wing of the French student movement. (This judgment regrettably also applies to most U.S. anarchists and “libertarian socialists” who denounce the S.I.’s, “abstractness” while remaining trapped in a precisely abstract, because superficial, critique of capitalism and the Left. For all its faults, the S.I. at least tried to grasp the laws of motion of these phenomena; without such a grasp, “libertarianism” leads

[11] Translator's footnote : Internationalist Communist Party (founded in 1943). Their English journal is Communist Program. [John Gray note : Splits over the years have led to the formation of a number of Internationalist Communist Parties. Details of the current contenders can be found at the International Library of the Communist Left site. The best available history of this current is by Philippe Bourrinet - online in French and in English as pdf files. The English translation was originally published by the International Communist Current, of which Bourrinet used to be a member, as The Italian Communist Left 1926-45. (ICC, 1992)]

[12] Translator's footnote : Ratgeb : pseudonym used by Vaneigem for his book, *De la greve sauvage a l'autogestion generalisee* Editions 10/18, Paris, 1973. [John Gray note : Translated into English minus the preface as 'Contributions to the revolutionary struggle intended to be discussed, corrected, and principally put into practise without delay'. (Bratach Dubh, 1981). Online at james's coffeehouse reading room site]

[13] 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.

[14] 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.

[15] Translator's footnote : Published in 1975. Distributed by Editions de l'Oubli, Paris.

[16] A left-wing intellectual French weekly.

[17] Translator's footnote : *Veridique rapport sur les derniers chances de sauver le capitalisme en Italie*. [John Gray Note : Recently translated by Len Bracken and published by Flatland Books]

[18] Translator's footnote : i.e. The movement of occupation of workplaces and campuses during May '68.

[19] 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.

[20] Translator's footnote : Geugan 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.

[21] Translator's footnote : Cardan - Chaulieus real name. (tr) [John Gray note : Chaulieu and Cardan were both pseudonyms used by Cornelius Castoriadis.]

[22] Translator's footnote : Jean-Pierre Voyer, author of "Reich : How to Use" (available from Bureau of Public Secrets, P.O. Box 1044 Berkeley, Ca. 94701) and other texts published by Champ Libre. (tr.) [John Gray note : The Bureau of Public Secrets website has some of Voyers texts on line]

[23] *Le communisme : un monde sans argent (3 vols.)* by *Organization des jeunes Travailleurs Revolutionnaires*. Paris, 1975. [John Gray note : Online at this link]

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

Translator's Footnotes

[1] 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 "Bordiguist" 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. [John Gray note : A number of translated articles by Camatte including *The Wandering of Humanity* are available at the time of writing in "This World We Must Leave and Other Essays" (ed. Alex Trotter) (Autonomedia, New York, 1995)]

[2] 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.)

[3] Translator's footnote : Joseph Dejacque : 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).

[4] Translator's footnote : The struggle over Radio Renascensa in Portugal during 1975 bears out this point.

[5] Translator's footnote : Appeared in English as *The Totality for Kids*. [John Gray note : On line in two parts at www.nothingness.org Part One. Part Two]

[6] 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.)

[7] 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.)

[8] Translator's footnote : *La véritable scission dans l'Internationale* : Editions Champ Libre. Documents by various members of the S.I. concerning the splitting and dissolution of the group. [John Gray note : An English translation was published in 1974 entitled "*The Veritable Split in the Internationale*"]

[9] 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 sociological 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. [John Gray note : Lefebvre denies this and also makes some interesting charges of his own in an interview which you can find on line here on the Not Bored site]

[10] Translator's footnote : Published in the U.S. as *Decline and Fall of the Spectacular Commodity Economy*. [John Gray note : online at the Bureau of Public Secrets site]

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.

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 (sic). 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. Guegan, [20] 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 Guegan’s life over several pages. But if it is really necessary to talk about Guegan, 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 [21] 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 *S ou 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 [22] practices derision only to 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 (*usiniisme*) 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*. [23]

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