

An Introduction to the Situationists

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Contents

Introduction	3
Founding and History of the SI	4
The SI's Theory	5
May 1968	10
Superseding the SI	13
Suggested Reading	14

“Presented with the alternative of love or a garbage disposal unit, young people of all countries have chosen the garbage disposal unit.”

IS #1

Introduction

The Situationist International (1957–1972) was a relatively small yet influential Paris-based group that had its origins in the avant garde artistic tradition. The situationists are best known for their radical political theory and their influence on the May 1968 student and worker revolts in France. The Situationist International (SI) published a journal called *Internationale Situationniste (IS)*. Selections from the journal’s twelve issues have been translated and published by Ken Knabb as the *Situationist International Anthology*. The two other texts that are essential to an understanding of the SI’s theory are *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord (the SI’s leading theorist throughout its existence) and *The Revolution of Everyday Life* by Raoul Vaneigem. Debord said of *The Society of the Spectacle*: “there have doubtless not been three books of social criticism of such importance in the last hundred years.” Debord was perhaps thinking of Marx’s *Capital*, the first volume of which was published in 1867, exactly 100 years prior to the publication of *The Society of the Spectacle*. While Debord was certainly not known for his modesty, many who are familiar with his book, including myself, are tempted to agree with him. The British anti-state communist journal *Aufheben*, for example, feels that while it may not be this century’s *Capital*, it is one of the few books that could make such a claim. Another situationist claim, made in 1964 in *IS #9*, is in many ways far grander: “Ours is the best effort toward *getting out of the twentieth century*.” This essay will inevitably present some of the grounds on which to judge the validity of this latter claim.

The SI’s influence in the United States is most noticeable in the anarchist milieu. The situationists, however, were not anarchists. “All kinds of recent experiences have shown the recuperated confusionism of the term ‘anarchist,’ and it seems to me that we must oppose it everywhere,” wrote Debord in 1968. The situationists could be termed anti-state communists: they were heavily influenced by Marx and did not identify with the anarchist tradition, yet shared the anarchist opposition to the state. (The situationists, however, did not call themselves communists due to its popular association with Communist Parties.) Anarchists in the United States often have a number of misconceptions regarding the SI. One misconception is that the situationists were incomprehensible Marxist intellectuals and therefore have nothing to offer the masses of people waiting for the simple and practical ideas of the anarchists. This misconception appeals to the growing number of anarchists who have a knee-jerk reaction to anything that sounds “Marxist” or “theoretical,” and the growing number of anarchists who care neither for Marxist theory nor anarchist principles but prefer identity politics or leftist moralizing. Other misconceptions result from divorcing the concept of the spectacle from Debord’s critique of capitalism, or from focusing only on the lifestyle or aesthetic aspects of the SI.

It is important to understand the SI in relation to Marx, to see how they saw their own project as a continuation of Marx’s critique of capitalism (and this essay will certainly focus on this). “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it,” wrote Marx. “So far philosophers and artists have only interpreted situations; the point now is to transform them,” wrote the SI. In many ways the situationist idea of the realization and suppression of art is similar to the theoretical realization and suppression of philosophy undertaken by Marx. In keeping Marx’s theory alive, the situationists, like Marx, drew inspiration from Hegel. “The owl of Minerva [Roman

goddess of wisdom] spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk,” wrote Hegel, meaning that philosophy presupposes a shape of life grown old, a detachment from life, and a judgement *post festum*. Echoing Hegel, but with a fundamentally different approach, Debord wrote, “[t]he greatness of art only emerges at the dusk of life.” The SI were no mere artists, and they proclaimed their greatness rather early on.

Founding and History of the SI

In his book, *Guy Debord*, Anselm Jappe writes, “Guy Debord felt certain that the disorder that overtook the world in 1968 had its source at a few café tables, where, in 1952, a handful of somewhat strayed young people calling themselves the Letterist International used to drink too much and plan systematic rambles they called *derives*.” The Letterists were originally a group of avante-garde artists following in the tradition of the Dadaists and Surrealists clustered around Isidore Isou, whose desire to reduce poetry to the letter gave them the name Letterists. In 1951, the young Debord went to the Cannes Film Festival and was particularly impressed (unlike the rest of the audience) by a film shown by Isou and the Letterists entitled “Treatise on Slobber and Eternity,” which had no images and onomatopoeic poetry and monologues for a soundtrack. Subsequently Debord was to play an important role among the Letterists. In 1952 Debord made the film *Howling in favor of Sade*. The film, like all of Debord’s films, sends a message while critiquing the medium: “Cinema is dead. Films are no longer possible. If you want, let’s have a discussion” is Debord’s message near the beginning of the film. The film had a black or white screen throughout. Various quotations, observations on the Letterists, and theoretical propositions are spoken in the film, but there is also much silence. The latter part of the film consists of 24 minutes of silence and darkness.

The Letterists were interested in Dada-type cultural sabotage, inventing a new activity to replace art, and aesthetics and art in itself. In 1950, the Letterists sabotaged Easter high mass at Notre Dame. They gagged, stripped, and bound a priest. An ex-Catholic Letterist took his vestments, went up to the pulpit and said, “freres, Dieu est mort” and started talking about the implications of the death of God. The congregation tried to lynch him and he had to surrender to the police in order to save his life. Another stunt some Letterists pulled was sabotaging Charlie Chaplin’s press conference. This was too much for Isou, however, and he denounced it. This led to a split among the Letterists.

Debord and the faction that broke with Isou founded the Letterist International (LI) in November, 1952. They set up a journal called *Potlach*. The Letterists drank a lot, did drugs, and generally tried to avoid work. Within their social group there was more than one attempted murder and several suicides. During this time France was undergoing a rapid modernization, and the Letterists railed against the banality of the consumer society. The LI had a certain organizational seriousness that would become even more apparent in the SI. Members were expected to live their theory and completely reject bourgeois society. In a 1961 film, Debord captured the spirit of uncompromising radicalism that was being formed in these years: “I have scarcely begun to make you understand that I don’t intend to play the game.”

In 1957 the SI was founded at Cosio d’Arroscia in Northern Italy, principally out of the union of two prior avant-garde groups, the LI and The Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus. “The SI is the first artistic organization to base itself on the radical inadequacy of all permissible works,” they proclaimed in 1960. (It would seem that they later ceased to consider themselves an “artistic organization” at all.) The SI had members from Algeria, Belgium, England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, and Sweden.

Organizationally the national sections were held together through annual conferences and the journal, which was published once or twice a year in Paris. The journal was dirt cheap, had glossy paper and gold metal-board covers, and had no copyright.

The early SI was concerned with breaking out of everyday capitalist routines and roles and creating “situations” of a superior passional quality. They were interested in urban planning and architecture. They went on derives, or wanderings throughout the city, experiencing the urban environment in a new way, and recording their findings and experiences. They took to “[t]he study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behavior of individuals,” which they termed “psychogeography.” They believed in the necessity of the realization and suppression of art, or the abolition of art as a separate sphere of life and the realization or integration of the passion and beauty of art into everyday life.

In 1962 there was a split between political theorists and artists in the SI. Debord insisted that art must be dissolved into a unitary revolutionary praxis. From then on, the SI no longer focused on superseding art through finding an activity to replace it. In 1967 Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* and Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life* were published, both providing brilliant critiques of modern capitalism from a situationist perspective.

Throughout its existence, the SI had an average membership of around 10 or 20. In all, 63 men and 7 women from 16 different countries were members at one time or another. Over half were excluded at one time or another, and most of the others resigned. *IS* #1–5 were done collectively, issues 6–9 were done mostly by three people, and issues 10–12 were done mostly by Debord (he called these issues “the best ones”). The SI’s last conference was held in 1969. After 1968, the SI was unable to deal with the new period of struggle. When they formally dissolved in 1972, there were only two members left, Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti.

The SI’s Theory

The SI’s political theory was influenced by Marx, Hegel, Lukacs, the French group Socialism or Barbarism (from which they got their councilism and critique of the Soviet Union), the humanist Marxist Henri Lefebvre (who formulated a critique of everyday life), and to a lesser extent people as diverse as Wilhelm Reich and Nietzsche. The SI always used what they found relevant in various writers and discarded the rest. At various times they denounced people like Lukacs, Henri Lefebvre, and Sartre quite strongly. The SI was always quite convincing in their denunciations of various leftist academics or artists and their fashionable ideas.

I am now going to present some of the SI’s key theoretical concepts:

1. Recuperation and Detournement

Recuperation is the channeling of social revolt in a way that perpetuates capitalism. To understand recuperation is to understand how working class struggles are kept under control and how working class demands become integrated into capital’s strategy. To understand recuperation is to understand that it is a central function of the media and of modern unions. Punk rock culture being sold in boutique stores is an instance of recuperation. Of course, it is the inability of punk rock culture to effectively challenge anything that opens it up so completely to recuperation. The left, as capital’s loyal opposition, is the embodiment of political recuperation — or keeping things within the realm of politics and representation. Detournement is something like the opposite of

recuperation. It is the appropriation of images or ideas and the changing of their intended meaning in a way that challenges the dominant culture. A good example of this is the detoured comics that the situationists popularized, in which revolutionary ideas and slogans are substituted for what the comic characters are supposed to be saying.

2. Alienation and Separations

In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx put forward his critique of alienation. He observed that the capitalist relationship of wage-labor puts the worker in the position of being forced to sell his labor-power (his time and energy) to the capitalist in order to survive. His working activity is therefore not an expression of his desires and creative capacity, but a forced labor that confronts the worker as an *alien* imposition dictated by someone else. The worker *alienates* his labor-power in order to receive a wage. This circumstance, Marx observed, alienates 1) the laborer from the product of his labor (since he does not determine its fate), 2) the laborer from the act of labor (since the labor process is dictated by the capitalist), 3) man from his species-being (his nature and intellectual species-powers, determined by the course of human development), and 4) man from man (workers do not determine their activity together and the capitalist stands above them as a tyrant).

Unlike Marxist-Leninists, the situationists made full use of Marx's theory of alienation and built much of their analysis of modern capitalism on this conceptual basis. The SI emphasized that "the revolutionary organization must learn that it can no longer combat alienation with alienated means." Organizational forms that do not allow for people to freely determine their activities together (hierarchy) are alienated means. They encourage people to work for alien causes or ideals. Like Socialism or Barbarism, the SI wanted to destroy the division between order-givers and order-takers. Their critique of alienation led the SI to strongly reject the state as a perfect example of an "alienated means."

The SI also characterized spectacular society (more on the spectacle later) as a system of separations. As the situationist-influenced *Against Sleep And Nightmare* writes, "As the market expands, it needs to sell more commodities. To sell the commodities, a capitalist has to make people not just want the commodity but need the commodity. By fragmenting more areas of previously undifferentiated social life into quantifiable units, the capitalists forced atomized workers to meet their needs externally rather than through community-direct non-market relations." As the economy as a separate sphere of life expands to encompass more and more of our activities, our separation from each other and from our own desires and powers becomes more acute. The SI had a theoretical basis for understanding the alienated condition of modern man as depicted in art and literature. Only the destruction of capitalism can end the domination of the economy over all of life.

3. Specialization and Militantism

As Marx pointed out, class society depends on the division of labor inaugurated through the division of mental and physical labor. Capitalism further expands this division of labor by creating the need for the management and control of ever greater domains of social life. Capitalism produces a whole array of specialists (psychologists, professors, scientists, etc.) who work to perpetuate capitalism. We usually don't choose to be dependent on specialists, it is just the way the system is set up. A good example of this is the rule of specialists called politicians who represent people whether or not they wish to be represented. The situationists understood how this feature of capitalism is mirrored by its leftist opposition. The leftist role of militant fits perfectly within the world

of separations that the situationists hated: the militant is a devout believer in a cause to which others must be converted, and in the service of this cause the militant feels obliged to speak for “the people” and say what is good for “the people.” The leftist militant is an aspiring bureaucrat. The SI understood the critique of specialization to be fundamentally a critique of class society and an affirmation of communism. “In a communist society there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities,” wrote Marx.

4. Subjectivity

In contrast to the objectivist dialectics of Marxism-Leninism and the cold objectivity of corporate capitalism, the SI emphasized the subjectivity of revolt, the proletariat’s capacity be the conscious subjects of history and not the passive objects of bureaucratic design. Despite the objective build-up of great amounts of wealth and the ability of workers in the industrialized world to buy various new commodities, there is an increasing subjective poverty of everyday life. The SI railed against boredom and the banality of the spectacular commodity society. They spoke of the subjective feelings of oppression and passivity that characterized everyday life in capitalist society, instead of only focusing on economic struggles or political conflicts. Vaneigem epitomized the SI’s tendency to focus on the subjective, on desire and its frustration.

5. Survival

The SI, observing what they saw as the “proletarianization of the world,” felt it necessary to emphasize that the survival that can be guaranteed by capitalism is not the same thing as actually living. Were it not for their emphasis on the subjective, they would not have seen this as very important. Marx strongly criticized the degradation of human activity inherent in the wage-labor relationship: “[labor] is therefore not the satisfaction of a need but only a means to satisfy needs outside itself.” The worker gets a wage with which he can buy commodities sold by capitalists, but he has no control over production. This is perhaps the fundamental basis for the SI’s counterposing of life to survival. Life is an affirmation of one’s desires and creative capacities, whereas survival is working, consuming, watching television, etc. Often the SI expanded upon many of Marx’s ideas, which is completely necessary given the development of capitalism that occurred over the course of a century.

6. Ideology

“Revolutionary theory is now the sworn enemy of all revolutionary ideology, and knows it,” wrote Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*. The SI once proudly reminded their readers that Marx had a critique of ideology, that this was inherent in his *method*. They were right, of course. Although Marx did not really flesh out this critique too much, it is implicit in much of his work, and *The German Ideology* was meant to be a critique of the ideological thinking of German philosophers. Ideology is the false consciousness that is reproduced by the dominant social order for the purpose of its continued dominance. The divine right of kings would be an example of such false consciousness. Racism, Social Darwinism, Liberalism, and Progress are all ideologies that have been used by capitalism for various reasons. In capitalism, ideology appears as the reification of thought, or the severance of theory from practice (in which case the *theory* could best be termed *ideology*). The SI was keenly aware of the separation of the theory of worker’s control from its application in practice, as exemplified by Bolshevik ideology. The continued dominance of the Soviet Bureaucracy necessitated the use of the myth of worker’s control, the myth of a “worker’s state,” to hide the fact

of continued exploitation of labor. The workers were not being exploited, the myth goes, because everything they did was for the good of the worker's state, which includes them. So if workers rise up in revolt against this state, they must be counter-revolutionaries, since they are fighting against the worker's state, the political embodiment of revolution. There is a religious aspect to all ideology. On a subjective level, ideology appears as the domination of ideas — people acting for the greater glory of their ideology (God) instead of acting on the basis of their desires.

Now I will go into an overview of some of the Marxist ideas that are most important for the situationists and then into a brief look at the concept of the "spectacle." Marx has been viewed by some as a theorist of political economy, by others as a theorist of a critique of political economy; by some as a proponent of some sort of planned economy, by others as a clear proponent of the destruction of the economy. Theoretically, the latter views are more defensible. However, Marx did leave himself open to the Leninist interpretation which sees state management (of capital) as the essence of socialism in that he did not take a stance against political participation and the seizure of state power as Bakunin did. Bakunin's great merit was in predicting that the seizure of state power by a Marxist party would lead to the creation of a new ruling class. To what extent does Marxism-Leninism depart from Marx's revolutionary project? This is undoubtedly a rather complex debate, but I mention that it exists to make clear that anti-state communists generally reject the state *on the basis* of Marx's theory, as surprising as that may sound to those who haven't read Marx (but who really, really don't like him).

The idea of dialectics comes up again and again with the situationists, and at first seems rather mystifying. An anarchist writer once called dialectics "a Marxists' excuse when you catch him lying." And while it can certainly be that, it is also other things. Looking it up in a dictionary will not solve the dilemma. The Greek '*dia*' means split in two, opposed, clashing, and '*logos*' means reason. Dialectics is a mode of reasoning that does not see things merely as split in two, but sees things as moving, interacting, and turning into their opposites. Dialectics is an understanding of things in motion. Since an object in motion is the unity of where it was and where it is going, dialectics implies an understanding of contradiction. The moments of a dialectical process can be described as affirmation, negation, and negation of the negation, where the two opposites of "negation" are distinct and different — the "negation of the negation" representing a new sort of affirmation. This is possible, in a sense, because dialectics reasons in three dimensions. As Lukacs pointed out, the premise of the dialectic is that "*things should be shown to be aspects of processes.*" "The student's *becoming* is the truth of his being," observed Debord. Dialectics can also be understood as a way of reasoning that looks beyond the mere appearance of things in order to grasp the underlying relations or processes taking place behind immediate appearance. Engels did not say "the proof's in the pudding," but rather, "the proof of the pudding's in the eating," which is more dialectical because it grasps the objective (the pudding) and the subjective (the eating) aspects of any judgement of pudding. Marx not only wrote of the class conflict that has taken place throughout history, he also understood that those who write about this conflict are not separate from its movement. It is his understanding of the dialectical relation between theory and practice that makes his theory revolutionary (see especially his *Theses on Feuerbach*). Marx once wrote that "[i]t is not enough that thought should strive to realize itself; reality itself must strive toward thought." Mustapha Khayati of the SI improved on Marx's formulation: "It is not enough for theory to seek its realization in practice; practice must seek its theory."

Related to the idea of dialectics is the category of totality, present in the writings of Hegel and Marx, emphasized by Lukacs, and used often by the SI. Totality means partly what it sounds like it means, but

also implies a dialectical understanding of a whole and the parts of which it is composed. For Hegel the totality was God, while for Marx it was the relations of production in a given society. Lukacs had the following to say on the subject: “The interaction we have in mind must be more than the interaction of *otherwise unchanging objects*... Thus the objective forms of all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other. The intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong. This is why only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand *reality as a social process*. For only this conception dissolves the fetishistic forms necessarily produced by the capitalist mode of production and enables us to see them as mere illusions which are not less illusory for being seen to be necessary.” The “fetishistic forms” Lukacs mentions are a result of *reification* (another term that the SI used), or the process in which capitalism personifies relationships between things and “thingifies,” or reifies relationships between people. All of this should make clear that dialectical thinking aims at a knowledge of reality, as distinct from a simple knowledge of facts.

An important aspect of Marx’s method is his materialism. Marx held that existence determines consciousness, whereas consciousness does not determine existence. In other words, ideas do not exist in a realm of their own and come down to manifest themselves in the material world. Ideas are produced through our experiences in the world, and they remain a component of that same world. This is the essence of Marx’s critique of idealist philosophy, as represented by Hegel. At the age of 19, Marx wrote a poem about Hegel in which he said that Hegel mixes up words into a “devilish muddle.” Part of the reason for this is that Hegel’s dialectics is ultimately the work of immaterial forces, whereas Marx places man in his material relations at the center of his thinking. Marx’s critique of idealism was intimately linked to his critique of ideology, since ideological thinking, whether it admits it or not, is based on the assumption of some correct consciousness that will transform social reality. Hegel wrote that “[h]istory is mind clothing itself with the form of events or the immediate actuality of nature.” In contrast, Lukacs, representing a Marxist viewpoint, wrote: “...*history is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man.*”

An understanding of capital is central to any understanding of capitalism and Marxist theory. So, what is capital? Fredy Perlman defined capital as, “...at once a name for a social relation between workers and capitalists, for the instruments of production owned by a capitalist, and for the money-equivalent of his instruments and ‘intangibles,’ ...” Capital is a social relation that necessitates the use of things in a specific way, and it is those things in so far as they are directly reproducing this social relation in the process of value accumulation. As Marx emphasized in the *Grundrisse*, capital must be understood as a process. Marx defined capital variously as “a social relation of production,” “value in process,” “a Moloch,” “accumulated labor,” and most poetically as “dead labour which, vampire like, lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” *Aufheben* defined capital as “the self-expansion of alienated labour.” This alienated labor appears as a commodity (C) in Marx’s basic formula for capital (where M is money): M-C-M. Money is exchanged for the commodity (labor-power) that yields a greater amount of money. To simplify, we have M-M, money that yields more money (which sounds like nonsense in itself), or capital, “self-expanding value,” as Marx wrote.

It is of fundamental importance to understand that Marx had a critique of value-producing labor (and many Marxists do not understand this). In capitalist society, labor has a twofold character: it is an activity that produces use-values, or useful products, and it is a unique commodity that produces value, the “appearance-form” of which is exchange-value. Value exists by virtue of the process of exchange and is not simply a “property” of a commodity. In capitalism, people relate to each other economically only in so far as the other person possesses things (labor-power or other commodities)

that they find useful. Social relations are not established directly, but through things. In this way, value makes its appearance and becomes measurable by the quantity of abstract socially necessary labor-time embodied in the product of labor, the commodity. Value is regulated through the market, but not by any individual. Capitalist social relations not only appear to be but actually are “material relations between persons and social relations between things.” Marx termed this characteristic of capitalism “the fetishism of commodities.” Marx tried to explain the fetishism of commodities by likening it to religion, in which “the productions of the human mind appear as independent beings endowed with life, entering into relationships with each other and with humans.”

Debord’s concept of the spectacle is a form of commodity fetishism. Debord emphasized that the spectacle is not a collection of images, but rather, “a social relationship between people mediated by images.” Similarly, Marx had written that capital is a social relationship between people mediated by things. The spectacle is “the concrete inversion of life” and the “autonomous movement of non-life.” The principle of the spectacle is “non-intervention.” For Marx, money accumulated beyond a certain threshold is transformed into capital. For Debord, capital accumulated beyond a certain threshold is transformed into images. Debord updated and expanded upon Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, applying the idea of reification to all areas of social life. To better understand all of this, one must read *The Society of the Spectacle*.

May 1968

Now I will present a brief overview of the revolutionary movement and events of May 1968. From the standpoint of the SI, it is important to mention *On the Poverty of Student Life*, a situationist critique of student life and capitalist society, and an excellent introduction to situationist ideas. In 1966, some students sympathetic to the SI got themselves elected to the University of Strasbourg student union. They intended on dissolving the student union after gaining their positions, but first they wanted to cause a bit of a scandal. They contacted the SI, seeking to collaborate on some form of propaganda denouncing the university and putting forward a revolutionary critique of capitalism. The result was that *On the Poverty of Student Life* was written mainly by the SI member Mustapha Khayati, 10,000 copies were made using university funds, and the pamphlets were distributed all over campus on the first day of classes. This led to a court case in which the judge denounced the anarchistic threat to the university. (See library.nothingness.org)

Within the context of radical ideas like those of the SI gaining some degree of popularity, growing agitation against the Vietnam war, and disgust with university regulations and anti-sexual statutes, the students of France began to stir things up a bit. At Nanterre university, for example, men invaded the women’s dormitories and the women invaded the men’s dormitories. The situationist Rene Vignet, in his book about May ‘68, writes that at Nanterre, about 4 or 5 radicals who were ‘campus bums’ of sorts who agreed with the SI started the agitation in December 1967 that would lead to the revolutionary crisis of May ‘68. During a struggle against police presence at Nanterre, these young radicals began calling themselves the enrages, or “the enraged,” as this was the name given to the most radical elements during the French Revolution. They photographed plain-clothed policemen and publicized blown-up photographs of them on campus. They also began interrupting the courses of sociologists and throwing fruit at the professors, who were sometimes protected by leftist students.

On March 22 there was a student take-over of an administration building at Nanterre, and on March 29 Nanterre was closed for 2 days. Then on May 2, the university was closed indefinitely. On May 3

there was a large meeting at the Sorbonne to protest the closure of Nanterre and the threatened expulsion of students. After the police showed up, people ended up getting beaten up and arrested. At this point, the students were extremely angry and one of the police vans never made it back to the station. Battles erupted in the nearby Latin Quarter between students and police. After this initial battle, a week of student demonstrations and rioting ensued.

By May 6 the riots had grown to include many workers, unemployed, high school students, and young hoods (juvenile delinquents) and by May 10 most of the rioters were not students. Residents of the area gave food and water to the rioters even though some of their cars were perhaps being burned in the streets. Police had been given orders to clear the streets and there was street-fighting throughout the night. Rioters erected barricades, made lots of graffiti, and threw many cobblestones and molotov cocktails at police.

On May 11 the police were ordered to withdraw from the Latin Quarter and on May 13th the faculties were reopened. So on May 13th, immediately after the riot police left, the Sorbonne was occupied by the students. The students began meeting in a general assembly and forming an Occupation Committee to coordinate the struggle. The Occupation Committee consisted of 15 members who were elected and revocable on a daily basis by the general assembly (one of which was the enrage Rene Riesel). There were many different political tendencies visible at the occupied Sorbonne. There were those who wanted university reform, those who wanted the fall of Gaullism (de Gaulle was president of France), and those who wanted to see the end of class society.

Also on May 13, the main trade unions, the CGT (Communist Party controlled union), CFDT, and FO, called a one day general strike protesting police violence and for long-neglected claims having to do with wages, hours, retirement, and union rights. Many workers assembled at the Renault works plant at Boulogne Billancourt (the largest factory in France). Already the Communist Party (CP) is distributing a leaflet calling for "resolution, calm, vigilance, and unity" and warning against "provocateurs." The union (CGT) loudspeaker calls for modernization and warns about "disruptive elements, alien to the working class."

In the afternoon, a huge march assembles workers, students, and teachers. The CP has thousands of stewards encircling the marchers, preventing contact between students and workers, and then trying to disperse people when they say the march is supposed to be over. Many of the students wanted to assemble with workers down another street, and when some of them propose this, they are assaulted by CP stewards. At one point during the march, a police car went down one of the streets where people were marching (perhaps they did not expect people to be on this street or they thought the march was over). With nowhere to go, the cop accelerates, injuring people. One of the two cops in the car is dragged out and beaten, but his life is saved by the CP stewards. The crowd started rocking the police car and the other cop fired into the crowd, luckily not hitting anyone. He was immediately set upon by the crowd, but the CP stewards helped this cop get away as well.

On May 14, the Sud Aviation plant at Nantes is occupied by workers. It becomes clear that the unions are not in control of the movement, and the one day general strike turns out to be a massive wildcat strike. On May 16, the Renault factories at Cleon and Flins are occupied by the workers. By May 17, millions of French workers are on wildcat strike. Many students march to the Renault works factory to show their solidarity with the striking workers and communicate with them. The students are greeted by closed factory gates and a CGT loudspeaker telling them it would be best if they went home. Some of the students are able to talk to the workers through the gates and later that night, but they do not charge the factory gates, thus legitimizing the authority of the CGT. The CGT tried to claim responsibility for the strike movement and reduce a general strike to a series of individual

enterprise strikes. At this point, they were not very successful. The workers who were taking control of their own lives had little intention of going back to work. As Rene Vienet observed, “[f]or the unions the only use of all the revolutionary strength of the proletariat was to make themselves presentable in the eyes of an effectively dispossessed management and practically nonexistent government.”

By this time, back at the Sorbonne there has been all sorts of discussions of social issues and the revolutionary struggle in the lecture halls, and worker-student action committees were formed by students and whoever else wanted to join them. The occupied universities such as the Sorbonne and Censier have invited workers and the general public to participate in their activities. The worker-student action committees were especially prevalent at Censier. These committees established links with revolutionary workers, with whom they would draft and distribute leaflets, called for worker-controlled strike committees, and generally encouraged discussion of immediate problems among workers and students. There is much graffiti appearing all over the place, much of it situationist-inspired. Guy Debord’s 1953 slogan, “never work,” appears again, this time with an obviously more expansive meaning. One particularly touching inscription from the Sorbonne reads: “Since 1936 I have fought for wage increases. Now I have a telly, a fridge, and a Volkswagen. Yet all in all, my life has always been a dog’s life. Don’t discuss with the bosses. Eliminate them.”

The Occupation Committee at the Sorbonne was eventually squashed by leftist sects and conservatives and the general assembly was deteriorating. Many of the more radical people around decided to leave the Sorbonne. Thus the Council for the Maintenance of the Occupations (CMDO) was founded. On May 19 the CMDO moved into the National Pedagogical Institute. The CMDO contained Situationists such as Debord, Khayati, Riesel, and Vaneigem. They had a printing committee, a liaison committee, and a requisitions committee. They aimed to encourage the spread of the occupations and the autonomous organization of the workers apart from the Stalinist union hacks, with the ultimate goal of creating a society where the power of the worker’s councils would be the only power in the land.

A good example of the experience of May ‘68 and of a worker-student action committee is given by Fredy Perlman, who was active in one of these committees at the time. At a Citroen factory, a strike committee called for a strike and occupation, which the worker-student action committee helped publicize. On the day of the strike the action committee was prevented from entering the factory gates by the CGT. The CGT acted as if they had called the strike, so as to limit it to wage and working condition demands. Many foreign Citroen workers, already segregated in many ways from the French workers, lived in housing projects and were unable to make it to the factory during the strike. Members of the action committee helped organize French courses for these workers and found trucks and arranged for food to be transported from peasants who were supportive of strikers. Perlman’s action committee encouraged rank and file organization among workers by supporting the strike and trying to break down the barriers that divide the potentially revolutionary elements of society.

On May 24, there was a demonstration that turned into rioting in which part of the stock exchange was burned and two police stations were trashed. The government and bureaucratic organizations called for a ban on demonstrations and immediate negotiations (with bosses). France had been more or less shut down by strikes. Banks in France were closed. There was some amount of free food distribution from peasants, but not as much looting as there could have been.

On May 30, after returning to France (he had left), president De Gaulle announced that he intended to stay in power. He scheduled upcoming elections, the alternatives being elections or civil war. The right wing made an appearance demonstrating in favor of De Gaulle. The workers were given an offer for higher wages nationally called the Grenelle agreement, which was rejected. The strike had to be

broken factory by factory. And toward the end of May, the French revolutionary movement seemed to be losing steam. On June 6 the police drove workers out of the Renault factory at Flins. The unions were instrumental in limiting the revolutionary movement and were able to bring about the resumption of work almost everywhere. The unions would sometimes tell workers that other factories had returned to work when they hadn't. Through the failure of the revolutionary movement, the government gained back the power and relevance it had lost. Many leftist organizations were disbanded. On June 16 the occupation of the Sorbonne ended — the police forced everyone out. After De Gaulle won the elections on June 23, all occupied buildings were evacuated. The wildcat strike had involved 10 million workers, or 2/3 of the French workforce. They had paralyzed a modern industrialized nation and created a near-revolution.

Superseding the SI

“The SI must be superseded,” they wrote. They felt that revolutionaries to come after them must improve upon their theory while incorporating its strengths. Here I will raise a few questions as to what the supersession of the SI's theory might look like. In 1919, Lukacs wrote of the situation in the Soviet Union: “[t]he class struggle is now being fought from above.” This is a ridiculous ideological assertion. But what is it in Lukacs' theory, or in Marx's, that might lead one to say something like this? In 1969 the SI bemoaned a “lack of theoretical knowledge of the autonomous goals of the proletarian class struggle.” I'm not sure *exactly* what was meant by this. But does the “proletarian class struggle” have goals? How were Russian anarchists able to call the Bolshevik regime state-capitalist as early as 1918, a year before Lukacs gave his Marxist opinion on the issue?

Anarchist opposition to the state can seem rather crude from a Marxist standpoint, even purely ideological. But if the Marxist sees the class struggle as having goals that flow through history and hover somewhere above reality, is this not ideological? Determinism did indeed appear in the SI's theory. The SI often wrote about the rapid development of technology as something that helped enable the birth of communist society. The basis for this way of seeing things is the Marxist notion of a growing contradiction between the forces of production and the property relations of capitalist society. The SI, like Marx, had a rather optimistic attitude toward technology. Now, it seems, this attitude could only be naive.

Other aspects of the SI that seem rather questionable today include their councilism and form of organization. The SI's enthusiasm for worker's councils as the form that the revolutionary struggle should take neglects to look at the nature of such councils. Communism is not any particular form of organization, and focusing on the form that worker's struggles take without dealing critically with their content is an obvious danger. (Is a directly democratic form necessarily a revolutionary one?) The SI created a formal organization in which Debord was very much the leading personality. Jacques Camatte's essay, “On Organization” presents an interesting critique of how such organizations can function as rackets that reproduce capitalist forms.

Jean Barrot, in an essay critiquing the SI, writes of Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life*: “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.” Only the revolution? Vaneigem represents the part of the SI that did not rely too heavily on Marx. But isn’t Barrot (probably without knowing it) presenting a rather undialectical concept of revolution? An insurrectionary anarchist approach, for example, is somewhat different. As the Italian *Anarchismo* wrote, in reference to the relative merit of such a “different life”, “[i]t is this anti-authoritarian illegal behavior which indicated what is defined the pre-revolutionary phase, rather than, as some maintain, that it is this phase which renders such behavior rational.”

How did Vaneigem, and Debord as well, point beyond some of the weaknesses of their theory? And how has the passage of time since May ‘68 changed how their theory is to be put into practice? It seems a continual questioning of these topics is necessary, but somewhat beyond the scope of this essay.

Suggested Reading

“All the talk about the French Situationists being associated with punk is bollocks. It’s nonsense! ... The situationists ... were too structured for my liking, word games and no work. Plus they were French, so fuck them.”

— John Lyden (Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols)

- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*: Remarkable analysis of modern capitalism. One of the most important books of the 20th century.
- Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*: Further development of *The Society of the Spectacle*’s ideas. Focuses on spectacular politics in a way that is relevant to the post-9-11 world.
- Debord, Guy and Gianfranco Sanguinetti. *The Real Split in the International*: Written when the SI was dissolving. Interesting, but not as good as Debord’s other books.
- Debord, Guy. *Panegyric*: Very well written autobiography that isn’t much of an autobiography at all.
- Debord, Guy. *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents*: Excellent.
- Vaneigem, Raoul. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*: Brilliant and a pleasure to read. Most influential for many anarchists.
- Vienet, Rene. *Enrages and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May ’68*: Situationist account of what the title says.
- Perlman, Fredy and Roger Gregoire. *Worker-Student Action Committees, France, May ’68*: Informative and self-critical account from people involved.
- Gray, Christopher, ed. *Leaving the 20th Century*: Aesthetically pleasing and a good short introduction to the Situationists.
- Dark Star. *Situationists and the Beach*: Also a decent introduction to the Situationists that is aesthetically pleasing.

- Knabb, Ken, ed. *Situationist International Anthology*: The best of the SI journals. Quite a large book, but well worth the time.
- Jappe, Anselm. *Guy Debord*: Excellent look at Debord's theory.
- Black, Bob. "The realization and suppression of Situationism": introduces the SI. Available at www.inspiracy.com
- *Against Sleep and Nightmare*. "Go 'Beyond the SI' in Ten Simple Steps": lays out a summary of the SI's theory and analyzes it a bit. Available at www.againstsleepandnightmare.com
- Barrot, Jean. "Critique of the SI": critique from an anti-state communist perspective. Available at www.geocities.com
- Jappe, Anselm. "Guy Debord's Concept of the Spectacle": from the Jappe book. Available under "pamphlets" at treason.metadns.cx
- Brinton, Maurice. "Paris: May 1968": eye-witness account of the events. Available at www.prole.info
- All sorts of Situationist texts: www.cddc.vt.edu and library.nothingness.org
- May, '68 graffiti: www.bopsecrets.org (from Ken Knabb's website)

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Jan D. Matthews
An Introduction to the Situationists
2005

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