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L’Internationale Situationniste, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and the Crisis of the Marxist Imaginary

Stephen Hastings-King

The Situationniste Internationale was a small transnational group of artist-revolutionaries that came out of the neo-Dadaist Lettriste movement. In Paris, Guy Debord and a small, changing cast of friends and supporting characters tracked through the Parisian cultural and political underground along the path laid earlier by the Surrealists. Skilled as provocateurs, anxious to abandon the constraints of artistic production and to acquire legitimacy as revolutionaries, Debord and his friends almost immediately began to look to the journal Socialisme ou Barbarie, edited by the group of the same name led by Cornelius Castoriadis.

SB is a crucial, though little discussed, referent in the evolution of Guy Debord. The relationship was central for Debord, and worked on several levels. After months of discussion with SB militants, Debord joined the group for a few months during 1960-1961. The merger was inconclusive and strained. However, in the pages of the journal L’Internationale Situationniste, SB played an important role as the symbol of the “new revolutionary movement” with which Debord increasingly identified. Initially, SB was simply part of the political landscape. However, once Debord became more involved, SB became much more central, and the “Situ” journal much more deferential toward the older group. Debord was a sympathetic observer of SB, and his accounts form one of the few views of the group from an outside perspective. SB functions as an Archimedean point around which the Situs tried to pivot from art and cultural dissent into revolutionary politics. When SB exploded in 1963 and Castoriadis began to publish his long text “Marxisme et la théorie révolutionnaire”—in which he argues that “it has come to the point where one can either be Marxist or a revolutionary”—Debord began a sustained attempt to exclude SB from the revolutionary movement and to usurp its role in a new revolutionary vanguard. Elements of SB’s...
revolutionary project were central components in Debord’s collage approach to Marxism and cultural critique as deployed in the 1967 Society of the Spectacle and as dismantled in the 1975 film of the same name. Debord’s use of SB is curious for its external viewpoint. He maps SB’s notions of the history of the workers’ movement, bureaucratic capitalism and socialism as direct democracy onto a Marxist framework closer to Lukacs and Althusser in its abstract relation to the working class and revolution. In this paper, I argue that Debord’s reversion to dialectical Marxism is a response to the implosion of SB. Debord’s collage approach to revolutionary politics makes him interesting as an actor within and symptom of the crisis of the Marxist Imaginary.

SB and the Marxist Imaginary

When the Situationiste Internationale began to publish its journal in 1958 and to position itself on the fringes of the Parisian cultural and political underground, Socialisme ou Barbarie was regarded as the most “proletarian” and sophisticated of revolutionary Marxist organizations. The group was founded by Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and a circle of less well-known militants as an oppositional tendency within the Trotskyist Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI) in 1946. The Chaulieu-Montal Tendency, as it was known, broke with the PCI in 1948 over the problem of interpreting the Soviet Union. Between 1948 and 1956, SB developed a variant of Marxist revolutionary theory notable for its sweep and attention to the situation of the working class, then undergoing radical change through the implementation of Fordism and the crisis of Stalinism. By 1958, SB’s revolutionary project had become a primary reference-point for new radical organizations that were emerging in the space created by the intensification of the Algerian War and the retreat into self-isolation of the Parti Communiste Français. SB’s project was built around extended interpretations of working-class actions since 1953 and seemed confirmed by the Hungarian Revolution of October-November, 1956. SB defined the terms in which these new organizations understood their situation. The following is a cursory overview of the notion of the Marxist Imaginary, the social-imaginary formation that shaped how SB articulated itself and its object, its entry into a protracted crisis and the role played in this by the Hungarian Revolution.

The central elements of revolutionary theory, or of any vision of society (and in this, revolutionary theory is no more or less a fantasy than any other), are what Cornelius Castoriadis has called “social-imaginary significations.” These are the product of intellectual labor expended upon social spaces,
shaping definitions of the world, its history, the possibilities of change and modes available for political entities to shape or participate in that change. Social-imaginary significations structure representational, intentional and affective relations to the social-historical.5

The post-war French Left was dominated by the Parti Communiste Français and its trade-union ally, the Confédération Générale du Travail. It and was, in turn, shaped by it. The PCF-CGT system agitated with primary reference to a working-class constituency: it also exerted an enormous pull over the para-academic urban culture within which circulated most dissident Parisian students and intellectual workers (Badie, 1977). The system was opposed to its Left by a series of small militant organizations that operated in a nebulous cultural environment that Pierre Bourdieu has called the “delimited field of ideological production.”6 These organizations were comprised of “specialists in ideological production” who, lacking the material resources of the PCF-CGT system, worked to fashion positions with specific reference to the textual tradition at the core of the Marxist Imaginary.

All heretical projects had to work through Marxist significations as shaped by the dominant PCF-CGT position. They also had to position themselves horizontally—with respect to each other—and vertically—with respect to an imagined version of the revolutionary working class. In postwar Marxism, the paradigm for such heresy was Trotsky, who argued that Stalin represented the bureaucratization of the Russian Revolution and was therefore not Lenin’s legitimate heir. For Trotsky, the ultimate demonstration of his claims would come with a second proletarian revolution. Led by the “real” revolutionary vanguard and mobilizing the “real” proletariat, the second revolution would sweep away Stalinism and institute in its place a more radical socialism. Most revolutionary groups appropriated versions of this narrative to emplot themselves and their vision of the Imaginary. Central to all versions was a relation to the working class. The construction of a representation of the “real” proletariat was a fundamental element in collective self-fashioning for revolutionary organizations: this representation gave coherence to intentional relations-to-the-world, which in turn enabled individual militants and workers to map affect onto a vision of revolutionary social change.7

PCF-CGT dominance over the delimited field and its imagined working class made itself evident in the fashioning of histories of the workers’ movement in general. The PCF-CGT system legitimated itself and its political actions in the present with reference to a narrative of the past. Therefore, any counter-claim necessarily involved the production of a counter-history. These counter-histories were often fashioned through the lens of dogmatic

Substance # 90, 1999
Marxism, which caused them to reproduce the same self-referential, self-legitimating character as could be seen in the PCF-CGT. The effect was to render transcendent Marx’s historical-materialist categories, which in turn led to conceptual and political closure and stasis. By the mid-1950s, this conceptual stasis was generalized among the fragments of the revolutionary opposition.

Socialisme ou Barbarie was an exception. Turning the same heretical pattern on the heretics themselves, SB announced itself in 1948 with the slogan: “Without development of revolutionary theory, [there can be] no development of revolutionary action.” The group bet that iconoclasm with respect to instituted Marxism could be justified by their analysis of contemporary capitalism. From 1948 to 1957, this gamble paid off in isolation. SB’s situation changed quickly and dramatically as a result of the Hungarian Revolution. In a media context dominated by paralysis, SB published Claude Lefort’s pamphlet “L’insurrection hongroise” within weeks of the events. Written quickly and published along with a highly polemical attack on the PCF, it was the first coherent reading to appear on the Parisian scene.8

The pamphlet’s general line is that Hungary experienced a real social revolution. This revolution already required a total social crisis. Such a crisis was simpler to think about in the Eastern context than it was in the West, because the states in each were quite different. Lefort argued the central and most revolutionary feature of the revolt was the role of the factory workers, who began almost immediately to set up direct-democratic councils to administer everyday life. Hungary became a direct-democratic society for a couple of weeks: this was, for SB, proof that its vision of socialism was viable and an occasion to extend and refine thinking about that vision.

Lefort’s analysis drew upon SB’s broader analytic framework. The group developed its revolutionary theory along negative/critical and positive/revolutionary axes. The former was built around a sweeping critique of contemporary social, economic and political organizations and ideologies. Modern capitalism, SB argued, should be seen as a new type of socio-economic formation, the defining features of which could be seen in industry in the separation of ownership from management and the rise of mass production. This new form was bureaucratic capitalism, which was instituted in “centralized” and “fragmented” forms in the East and the West respectively. Following the “string of bureaucracy,” SB extended their critique to encompass most aspects of Fordist culture.9

SB saw the Hungarian Revolution as the culmination of a mounting wave of autonomous worker actions that had begun soon after Stalin’s death.
in 1953. In the months following Hungary, building off of Lefort’s reading of the revolt, Castoriadis tried to formalize the implications of this revolution by an extended consideration of direct-democratic society ("Sur le contenu du socialisme II") and its links to everyday conflict in the factories ("Sur le contenu du socialisme III").

This optimistic narrative was central to the pamphlet and to the theorizing about revolution in the pages of SB during 1957-1958. It was not, however, the only way that the journal narrated events in Hungary. Daniel Mothé’s autobiographical accounts told a rather different story of the crisis as it played out at Renault’s Billancourt factory. Rather than a period of increased revolutionary possibilities, Mothé described a collapse of Marxism as social-imaginary signification that had enabled individual workers to articulate themselves, but as part of a class with a revolutionary telos, and to act upon that identification.10

The double narrative mirrored both the political situation and the nature of the SB readership. SB constructed itself and its journal around an ongoing (though largely imaginary /problematic) dialogue with the worker avant-garde. The journal is a kind of textual collage. At its center were texts like those by Mothé, written by workers about their own experience. Around this image was constructed another, of the worker avant-garde in action through strike reports and analyses. Situating these was a broad critical theory predicated on a close engagement with Marxism and with the conditions particular to bureaucratic capitalism. These rings of text were supplemented with more self-critical writings about the nature of revolutionary organization and theory. Very little information appeared about the actual life of SB as a group. Readers were invited to engage with the elements of this collage, which resolved through the process of reading into a complex image of the revolutionary working class.

The relation of the signifiers that made up this collage to their empirical referent was problematic. SB collectively misrecognized the specificity and complexity of the narrative viewpoint around which they hoped would be elaborated accounts of worker experience.11 SB readership was, more logically, a reflection of the group itself: educated, urban and Marxist, whose relation to the working class was a combination of fascination (following from the axioms of Marxist revolutionary theory) and distance (as a function of the nature of French social geography). SB’s working class was therefore a text-generated signified and the central social-imaginary signification around which SB and its journal were ordered. Definitions of political action and roles were predicated on a relation to this signified and its practical
activity. Broader oppositional attitudes were structured and legitimated with reference to it. The image of proletariat was the central material upon which the revolutionary movement expended intellectual labor. If Mothé—the "Worker" in SB's internal world—described a situation not particular to Billancourt, but one that could be generalized to the working class as a whole, then the crisis of the Marxist Imaginary had already entered its first phase.

In the period after 1956, the pages of SB were dominated by the optimistic reading of Hungary and the possibilities for revolution it presented. This reading was important for the newly constituted revolutionary Left because it enabled them to extract the central Marxist categories out from under Stalinism, and use them to construct a general orientation for their anti-war activities. The political situation grew more ambiguous after May 1958. Charles de Gaulle effectively staged a coup d'état in May 1958 to end a near-civil war in France that was driven by a cadre of ultra-right-wing paratroopers in Algeria. According to the Trotskyist theory of how revolutions happen, social crisis resulted in dual power that became civil war and then revolution (if political conditions were ripe, of course.)

The events of May should have been the signal for working-class action. But the workers did not act: they even supported the Fifth Republic Constitution when it was placed before the electorate in September. At this point, various people in the Left Opposition began to ask whether there had been some kind of basic change in the situation of the working class, and if this change required a reconsideration of traditional Marxist categories and politics. In the past, this kind of issue had often led militants to think their way out of politics— which left the general situation unchanged. This time, however, the question would not go away and the debate around it is the first round in a long series that mark the history of the collapse of the Marxist Imaginary at the level of political organization.

This crisis of the Marxist Imaginary should not be understood in overly teleological terms. Because of the intensity and complexity of affective investments, it was confronted only gradually. When the crisis was engaged directly, the result was usually traumatic. SB was among the few groups to try to confront it directly, but not until 1963. During 1957 and 1958, the group had feverishly tried to publish the journal on a regular basis in order to take advantage of their newfound visibility. These efforts exacerbated long-running financial and organizational problems. By the summer of 1958, SB collapsed into itself, as a dispute over how to reorganize the group in order to rationalize the production of the journal became a fight over the role of bureaucracy in the revolutionary movement. This dispute prompted the
departure of the more anarchist members of SB, including Claude Lefort and Henri Simon. It was clear to all, however, that this dispute coincided with the emergence of questions about the political role of the working class. As a result, everybody involved understood themselves in symptomatic terms as indicative of the need for a new type of revolutionary politics and a new type of revolutionary organization.

Publication Wars: IS and SB

During the fall of 1959, Debord and his comrades were filming the "psychogeographical experiments" in Les Halles that became the basis for "Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps" (Debord 1978). The third issue of L'Internationale Situationniste had just appeared; a copy of it reached Daniel Blanchard, a university student and member of SB since 1957:

There are moments in one's existence that stand out, as if of a more solid texture, drawn in stronger lines [that] contrast with the fuzziness and [...] ambiguity of the rest of life. And they really are charged with objective meaning, imparted by a movement of a sort of historic overdetermination. Often, that special quality only reveals itself retrospectively, but sometimes, too, it is perceived immediately. That is what I experienced on the day, in the autumn 1959, when I first glanced through an issue—number 3, I think—of the IS. At the time, I participated in the Socialisme ou Barbarie group [...] That day, as a few of us were going through the weekly mail, my eye was attracted by that sleek, elegant publication, with its scintillating cover and incredible title. I took hold of it and immediately began to explore what I gradually came to see as a newfound land of modernity, bizarre but fascinating.12

Blanchard’s relationship with Debord holds a particular place in the former’s affective world, as a kind of sustained brush with stardom. Moments in the relationship seem etched on his mind: the packaging of the IS, for example, and the impression it made on him. Everything about the journal marked it as different from most revolutionary publications. The cover, title, typeset and paper were all unusual. The layout was broken up by untitled photographs of people, clipped advertisements for automobiles or fall-out shelters, examples of détournement done on “Terry and the Pirates” and other comics. The journal presented itself as a kind of politicized Pop Art artifact. Socialisme ou Barbarie opted for a very traditional printed self-presentation. Tracts and Pouvoir Ouvrier were designed to reach a working-class audience, and retained the traditional look of militant publications: cheap paper, typescript text reproduced on mimeograph or roneotype, primitive or hand-
drawn graphics, when any were used. The main journal, SB, was also austere, with its red, white and black covers, simple typesets, moderate-grade paper, and lack of illustrations. Two different notions of how to present the avant-garde: one as proletarian, "authentic," tied to worker traditions; the other self-consciously breaking with these same audiences and traditions.

While IS looked like nothing else, most of the articles were attempts to work through ways of framing problems of culture, art and revolution inherited from Surrealism. Situationist politics were, and remained, predicated on subjective experience elevated to a trans-subjective level through variations on the traditional notion of the Artist. This was complicated by Debord's suspicion of representation and its function in the context of the spectacle, which prompted him to fashion for himself an inversion of this artist role. Subjectivism was consistent with Debord's use of everyday experience as a point of departure for thinking about alienation. This approach both opened up and limited his access to the terrain of revolutionary politics. In 1959, however, the journal's packaging and concerns suggested that the IS was "new" and "radical," and convinced Daniel Blanchard that it was developing in parallel to SB.

In principle, SB and Debord/IS were kindred groups, and the timing of their encounter fortuitous. However, the timing was off. As the IS was working to articulate a position for itself at the edge of a new cultural and political avant-garde, SB was grappling with a major internal challenge to the premises upon which its revolutionary project had been constructed. Castoriadis's text "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" argued that the Gaullist transformation of France into a Fordist state had eliminated most non-manageable structural contradictions. The changes in the organization of the State and its relation to European financial structures built on the effects for the working class of the Fordist assimilation of the trade-unions into the industrial status quo, the weight of Stalinism on Marxist discourse, and the importation of mass-consumer culture. Implying that there had been a sudden extension of assembly-line production techniques into semi-skilled industrial sectors (which is not empirically the case) Castoriadis characterized the outcome of this combination of factors as a political destructuration of the proletariat. In Marxist terminology, the working class had regressed from being a class for itself to a class in itself. As such, it was not capable of producing the patterns of socialization upon which rested SB's notions of revolution and socialism, and their self-conception as a revolutionary organization.

Substance # 90, 1999
Castoriadis argued that the crisis of the proletariat did not mean that all possibilities had been eliminated for revolutionary action. Fordist attempts to disempower politics in general and manage the population through consumption norms, paradoxically generalized the struggle between dirigeants and exécutants, which had been most evident at the point of production. The result was a multiplication of sources for potentially significant conflict. This combination of arguments enabled SB to continue to use schemata developed through the analysis of the working class to comprehend these conflicts. However, the challenge to this most basic of signifiers made the group’s relationship to it more rigid.

Destructuration posed more problems for SB. They had to be able to theorize social conflicts originating from any number of potential sources, and devise ways for the revolutionary movement to assume a role in the production of significations (types of hierarchy, modes of self-organization, ways of thinking about these patterns in a self-conscious manner)—a role SB had assigned to the worker avant-garde. It was not clear exactly what this would entail. At the level of theory, however, this position should have opened the way for social critique. Revolutionary theory could no longer simply dismiss the dominant culture as radically false; instead, it had to work out links to social, political and artistic movements and actions that originated from within, and in opposition to, the dominant culture. This was already the Situationist bailiwick. In practice, however, most SB militants continued to act as before. Most still considered revolutionary politics to center on interaction with the working class.

SB-IS Liaison: “Preliminaries to Define the Unity of the Revolutionary Agenda”

In principle, therefore, the interaction of SB and the Situationists could have been useful for both groups. Blanchard had long talks with Debord in bistros, and during endless roaming through the city. The main result was Blanchard’s participation in the filming of On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Unit of Time, and a jointly-written tract entitled “Prélinaire pour une définition de l’unité du programme révolutionnaire.” This document is interesting in the development of the notion of the spectacle as the translation into cultural terms of the division of intellectual labor characteristic of bureaucratic capitalism (between dirigeants and exécutants). The dominant culture is also racked by the central contradiction of that system:
The mechanism of cultural constitution thus relies upon a reification of human activities, which assures the fixing of the living and its transmission along the model of the transmission of merchandise, and which enforces the domination of the past over the future.

Such a cultural functioning enters into contradiction with the constant imperative of capitalism, which is to obtain the adherence of people and to constantly solicit their creative activity within the narrow confines in which they are imprisoned. In sum, the capitalist order only lives on the condition that it ceaselessly projects before itself a new past. ("Préliminaires" § 2).

The first paragraph outlines a definition of the spectacle as a system of social organization rooted in a generalized commodity fetishism. The second connects this to a generalization of the dirigeant/executant distinction. The effect is a disempowerment of desire, crucial to the maintenance and reinforcement of the spectacle: “Capitalist consumption imposes a movement of the reduction of desires by the regularity with which artificial needs are satisfied, which remain needs without ever having been desires; authentic desires are constrained to remain at the level of non-realization (or compensated in the form of spectacles).” ("Préliminaires" § 6)

“Préliminaires...” is in two parts. The first, “Le capitalisme: société sans culture” appears to have been written by Debord; the second, “La politique révolutionnaire et la culture,” by Blanchard. In such a document produced through dialogue, one would expect some migration of rhetoric. Debord’s section reveals a tentative assimilation of key SB concepts, particularly in the reworking of the notion of the spectacle. That of Blanchard, on the other hand, is more closed-off, and is a resumé of SB’s pre-1959 position. The juxtaposition indicates the complementarity of the projects, and the incommensurability of their respective theoretical languages and assumptions.

Debord assumed control over the tract’s layout and the expense of its publication. After it appeared on July 20, 1960, it circulated around SB without arousing much interest. By this point, Blanchard had left to do volunteer service as a teacher in Guinea. The task of liaison with Debord fell to Pierre Guillaume, a 19-year-old protégé of Jean-François Lyotard at the Sorbonne and in SB. In 1995, he published a problematic account of his relationship with Debord. The text tries to establish a parallel between the revolutionary Debord of the 1960s and the revisionist Guillaume of the 1990s. This general project is recapitulated in his account of Debord’s relationship with SB: just as Debord became an object of scandal and rumor upon leaving SB simply by telling the truth and being polite, so Guillaume-the-revisionist imagines...
himself to be victimized. Extended into 25 pages, the text is an exercise in literary abjection.\textsuperscript{20}

Debord in SB

Debord joined SB sometime in the fall of 1960. He attended regular meetings as well as those of the journal's editorial committee and that of \textit{Pouvoir Ouvrier}. He traveled to Belgium in February, 1961 as part of an SB "team" that went to survey the situation that had resulted from the recent (December-January) general strike.\textsuperscript{21} While in Belgium, the "team" met Robert Dehoux, who became the core—or the only member—of "Pouvoir Ouvrier Belge," which put out \textit{Alternatif}, a journal that had an SB/PO line and a Situ graphics sensibility. An assemblage of political traces make the trip sound quite important: Guillaume describes it as having been "quite loony" and "disappointing."\textsuperscript{22}

Debord made one attempt to influence SB's general framework. Using a review of Godard's \textit{A bout de souffle} written by SB member Sebastien de Diesbach (Chatel) and published in \textit{SB} no. 31, Debord tried to outline a "revolutionary judgment of art." The limitations of SB's engagement with the dominant or popular cultures were evident from the start. Reviews of books and films were usually written by the students who joined SB starting in 1957 (Blanchard, Chatel). The film pieces in particular relied on a reductive version of the theory of art articulated in "Hamlet." Film was treated as a mirror. Films that might serve the purposes of revolutionary theory provide an image of life in comparison to which that of the spectator might seem impoverished (\textit{Come Back Africa}), or reveal the impoverished nature of the everyday by performing it (\textit{A bout de souffle}).

Debord attacked this relation to film at several levels. It accepted as natural the division between spectator and work by using a traditional form of critique, which Debord defined as:

An interpretation among others of a work over which one has no hold. One claims that one knows better than the author what he is trying to say. This apparent pride is in fact a radical humility, because one completely accepts the separateness of the specialist in question, one despairs of ever acting upon him or with him (modalities that would obviously require that one concern oneself with what he was explicitly trying to do.) ("Pour un jugement" § 4)
The role of the critic therefore places art outside his or her purview, beyond his reach and in so doing produces a critique that is little more than a "second-order spectacle."

Critique is that which writes into spectacle its state of spectatorship. [The] specialized spectator, and therefore the ideal spectator, elaborates his ideas before a work in which he has no real participation. He rehearses, re-situates (remet en scène) his own non-intervention in the spectacle. The weakness of fragmentary judgments, haphazard and largely arbitrary, on spectacles that do not concern us is our fate in many banal discussions in private life. But the critique of art makes a show of such weakness, made exemplary. ("Pour un jugement" § 5)

The role of the critic in this case is like that of a design engineer who works at patterns of cultural passivity and transmits them to the generalist spectator. The critic is unlike a Fordist dirigeant in that this role is rehearsed in a more or less unconscious manner. The critic has no position outside the spectacle, but possesses specialized instruments (training, ability to manipulate words) that enable him to articulate his own passivity. One is invited to participate in the spectacle—to watch and be inspired by a film, say—but such engagement must come with a manual. This notion of spectatorship is built around alienation in everyday experience. The exemplary instance for thinking the phenomenon of alienation is consumption. This scenario determines the possibilities for thinking about how to overcome it, and the cultural division of labor upon which it is built. For Debord, what is required is a new "revolutionary art." The elucidation of this idea is a central task for theory: "we need a revolutionary critique of all art, not a critique of revolutionary art":

The revolutionary modification of forms presented by culture can be nothing other than the overcoming/transcendence (dépassement) of all aspects of aesthetic and technical instrumentalities that together constitute the spectacle as separated from life. It is not in the surface significations that one must seek the relation of the spectacle to the problems of society, but at a deeper level, at the level of its function as spectacle. ("Pour un jugement ..", § 4)

Revolutionary art would be produced through the deployment of free creative activity in a context where the separation of performer/artist and spectator had been broken down. While Debord offers no idea of what this might entail, he is clear about its goal, which is: "not to show people how to live, but to make them live." What is curious about this formulation is how it backs away from the more imbricated position occupied by the critic, who

Substance # 90, 1999
is socialized into patterns of interaction with culture in ways that only permit their recapitulation. Here, Debord makes a clear distinction between spectacle and “life,” but the latter category seems empty, like a purely formal negation of the former.

This proposal would expand the purview of the revolutionary movement, particularly with respect to the dominant culture and to the definition of who were militants and what militants did. A new kind of political organization would seek “something positive in modern culture, which appears in its self-liquidation, its movement of disappearance, its testimony against itself” (“Pour un jugement …” § 2). Militants in existing revolutionary organizations would have to overcome the tendency

...to oppose all intervention in cultural questions for fear of not appearing to be serious. On the contrary, the revolutionary movement should accord a central place to the critiques of culture and everyday life. But it is first necessary that all vision of these facts be disabused and not respectful of given modes of communication. The very bases of existing cultural relations must be challenged by the critique that the revolutionary movement must bring to bear on all aspects of human life and relations. (“Pour un jugement …” § 8)

Debord’s piece failed as an attempt to shape basic aspects of SB’s revolutionary program. Three reasons might explain this: the incommensurability of theories; Debord’s underestimation of what was implied in a switching of the premises of social critique; the extent to which SB was articulated as a group through fairly rigid internal hierarchies developed around Marxist analytic categories.

The most visible incommensurability is that Debord and SB did not elaborate the problem of alienation in the same way. From this divergence, however, emerged fundamentally different notions of social change, revolution and socialism. For Debord, the paradigm situation through which one imagined the problem was the relation of spectator to spectacle. Radical change entails a change in the relation of spectator to event, which in turn requires a redefinition of art and how it is created and consumed. An art-event, and any politics rooted in such, would necessarily be performative.

Debord’s relative optimism offered him a broader canvas for thinking about the performative dimension at the core of revolutionary art through experiments in “drift” and/or “unitary urbanism.” Following Lefebvre, Debord used the city as a way to generalize the subversion of situation relations that Dada had explored in more restricted and traditional art contexts. Psychogeography was an Art-event within which he tried to blur
the line between organizers and participants, artists and spectators, simply by calling all actors "situationists." The appropriation of urban space that Debord considered central to unitary urbanism—the paradigmatic contructed situation—was subjectively ordered. Subjectivity was the refusal of representation, a space of freedom for Debord, as it was for Virginia Woolf in Three Guineas and would be later for Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida.

Where for Woolf and Barthes, this position could be outlined or hinted at, for Debord the problem was making this subjectivity public and thereby politically useful. Resolution of this problem ran in two directions: making and refusing to show films like "Sur le passage.." and the transfer into revolutionary politics. Film was an unsatisfactory option: even in heavily mediated, self-conscious and montage-filled form, it still presented the viewer a reassuring (and therefore false) image. Translating performative strategies onto revolutionary politics resulted in a position that placed extraordinary emphasis on affect, and that used the traditional notions of art and artists to give significance to isolated acts of unauthorized activity. It also underestimated the regionality of culture: once a situationist-based performative politics gets confined to a particular subculture, it can offer some people limitless potential for performance—doubtless full of irony and skill—while relations in the larger society continue unchanged.

Situationist critical theory was based on a desire for revolution, but was boxed in by its strengths. Because it took cultural consumption as paradigmatic—especially the division of spectator/spectacle—it foregrounded subjective experience as shaped by the social and cognitive parameters of the dominant order. The furthest this type of critique could go is the inversion of the dominant order. Debord mapped negation onto the surrealist notion of shock, to argue that the experience of demystification was fundamental for any revolt against the dominant culture. At its most consistent, this could be linked by analogy to a broader notion of social revolution. When Debord tried to assume for himself the whole of the revolutionary project, these same assumptions about the centrality of shock as negation placed the origin of revolution outside existing social relations. This in turn set up Debord's reversion to Lukacsian transcendental Marxism in The Society of the Spectacle. Situ revolution would be cataclysmic, its model the return of the messiah. This with predictable results on Debord's notion of the Vanguard Party.

Despite the outcome of this broader juxtaposition, affinities nevertheless existed between the projects. Debord's theorizing of cultural revolution supplemented SB's productivism. If one were to assign a theoretical

Substance # 90, 1999
explanation to SB’s awkwardness with respect to matters cultural, it would be the lingering effect of the Marxist base-superstructure distinction. Debord’s main virtue would be in breaking it down and in forcing to the fore considerations about cultural comportment left implicit in SB thinking about social crisis and its relation to revolution and socialism.

The question of “fit” between these theoretical approaches was not raised as a function of more mundane problems. An indication of these can be found in transcripts of SB meetings. Debord was generally quiet at these sessions.23 The one exception was the morning session of SB’s “International Meeting” of May 22, 1961.24 During the morning session, which was devoted to yet another installment of SB’s interminable internal discussion about the “worker base,” Debord began to talk as if he had been watching the same television tuned to a different channel:

Mothé: In the present situation and in that which will present itself in the future, worker struggles will advance demands that the unions will not be able to defend because they go against their existence as unions—anti-hierarchical [demands] and conflict against the organization of production.

Guy: We are unrealistic because, not being part of the working class, we come up with solutions for working with the workers as if the problem was resolved. The revue (SB) is good, but the organization should exist in accord with the principles that it expresses, which is not the case.

Mothé: How to recruit the workers? Practically continue as in the past while simply modifying certain elements of our work (...)25

Guillaume [after outlining the political situation at the Gare St. Lazaire, where he had taken a job as a mail-handler], Proposition: during vacation, the students can work for a month as mail-handlers at the PTT.

Guy: The ideas of SB are misunderstood. I have had more than 200 students with whom I have directed discussions. They want to break everything and succeed at nothing. We do not carry the workers’ movement. Pouvoir Ouvrier is inaccessible and indirect. Concrete actions are what are needed. In conclusion: crisis.

[The cell from] Lyon is for implanting the organization in the working-class milieu. (...)25

Debord was rehearsing the grounds for his resignation speech by inserting fragments of a critiques of SB’s basic modus operandi between statements made by some of the group’s central actors 26 He broke into interventions by people who represented the two main axes of the group’s history: their relation to the working class and to the traditions of
revolutionary Marxism. The lack of response indicates the older group’s internal hierarchy.

More broadly, SB operated with general agreement as to the legitimacy of their analytic premises and definitions of politics. This crossing of structure and affect was held together by the central signifiers that SB retained from its journey through the instituted Marxist Imaginary and indicates the group’s vulnerability should any real question arise about this underpinning. Debord’s position represented a basic challenge to these hierarchies and to the notions of politics around which they were built. The result was that, when the category of “the everyday” came up in debate, it was understood that the everyday experience that mattered was that of the working class. Debord was expected to submit.

Debord’s interruptions leveled some basic charges at the group. He argued that the organization’s actual life, with its fixed internal hierarchies, did not correspond to SB’s ideas in general or to the image elaborated in the texts that had appeared on revolutionary organization in the journal. This was linked to another problem of self-conception: SB did not have a clear idea of how their publications circulated. SB journal was fine, Debord argued, but it did not address its purported (working-class) audience. Rather than reaching workers, SB presented an image of the group that framed and mediated an interior image of “the workers” to an audience of students, whose relationship to these images, and to the ideas that expressed them, was informed by their desire to “break everything.” They did not really understand SB. The group had a blind spot: it dealt with the problem of self-reflexivity only in the abstract. The other tack developed in Debord’s remarks criticized SB’s intellectualized notion of revolutionary politics: the group offered no feedback for anyone beyond its limits, no affect or sense of identification or involvement. This combined with what Debord described as the wholesale misapprehension of SB’s ideas, to raise the possibility that the group was talking to itself. However, he only proposed “direct actions” that were themselves abstract, and their timing bizarre.

Debord resigned from SB that night. According to Pierre Guillaume:

Then, in the end, he announced calmly and firmly to Castoriadis, then to Lyotard, and then to all, his intention to resign. All attempts by Castoriadis to make him reconsider his decision, that evening and the next day, remained in vain. Castoriadis displayed all the treasures of seduction he could: he outlined great perspectives: “if only the group’s bureaucratic and retrograde defects were transformed etc. etc.” Debord was listening without a word. When Castoriadis had finished, he only said “Yes…but...I don’t feel up to the task,” and also “It must be very exhausting [to build a

Substance # 90, 1999
revolutionary organization].” And Debord came to the next meeting at le Tambour café, gave his official resignation, paid his dues for the earlier month and the current, and said in a few words that he appreciated that the group existed, but that, for himself, he had no will to be involved in it. He thanked us for all he had learned. And disappeared. (Guillaume 3)

The scene is central for the author: Debord was polite and did nothing provocative, which itself caused a scandal because it violated “the small-group ethos of departure as divorce.” (Guillaume 3). Given the overall objective of this text, it is difficult to know if this description reflects anything accurately apart from Pierre Guillaume’s sense of his own martyrdom. In other accounts, Debord is supposed to have tried to start a revolt within SB and/or to have led away some of the younger students, only to abandon them later.28 Blanchard mentions this as a rumor heard from Guinea, the final odd note of Debord’s relationship with SB, which he had found odd from the outset: “[H]is membership, I felt, exceeded the closeness we had actually achieved: above all it seemed useless, and in fact, in our discussions Debord expressed the opinion that each group should continue, in practice, to follow its own path” (Blanchard 2).

Retracing the Trajectory: From Art to Politics

If SB was silent about the IS, things were quite otherwise in Debord’s journal L’Internationale Situationniste. Here, SB signified the new revolutionary movement, and was the pivot around which Debord tried to effect his transition from artist to revolutionary, and that of the Situationists from post-Surrealist art-gang to conspiracy on the leading edge of a vast negation of the dominant order. The writers of IS were consistent and sympathetic observers of SB until 1963–1964, when the latter began to stray beyond the confines of Marxism. The relationship between the two groups had three phases. The first three issues of IS mention SB in the context of the journal’s attempt to define its own contexts. The second phase occurred between 1960 and 1963. In IS numbers 4 through 8, SB was the embodiment of the new revolutionary movement to which the Situationists linked and subordinated themselves. In the first phase, the situationist critique of everyday life was more or less freestanding; in the second phase, Debord repeatedly argued that the critique of the everyday was legitimated and made coherent because it was elaborated with reference to the more revolutionary frame of reference. There was also a migration of rhetoric from SB into IS positions, particularly in the writings of Debord and Vaneigem. If the relation to SB can be
understood as abject, then the third period is its inverse. Once SB began to break out of its Marxist frame of reference, Debord considered them excluded from the Left and began to both heap ridicule on SB (Castoriadis in particular) and to take over large parts of SB’s earlier theoretical framework. Debord tried to transform himself into the inheritor of the “good” SB. He wanted to be Castoriadis.

The first three issues of IS can be understood as the organization’s attempt to fashion its own contexts and anticipate/shape its reception. This strategic operation was carried out on two fronts: relative to the art contexts from which the Situationists emerged, and relative to the social space from which they hoped to speak or act. Linking the two was the repertoire of properly situationist concepts and tactics.

The art referents were Dada and Surrealism. Debord and the other writers who contributed to these early issues were informed by these earlier avant-garde movements, even as they tried to distinguish themselves from them on generational and tactical grounds. In the generational conflict, Debord’s “Les souvenirs au-dessous de tout,” a short polemic against Benjamin Péret, played an important role.29

Of the Surrealists who made the slide from art to politics, Péret alone remained committed to a revolutionary position. He had been among the founders of the surrealist movement who early on had run afoul of Breton. Like many of the Catalans who emigrated to Paris after the massacres at Barcelona in 1937, Péret was a fierce opponent of Stalinism. Until his death in 1959, Péret was active in (or at least in close contact with) Trotskyist political organizations, along with his close friend Grandizo Munis, and was inevitably introduced on radio or in the newspapers as the authentic revolutionary among the Surrealists.30 This gave him the chance to operate in two public registers—artist and militant—that would often converge in pieces like his 1945 book Le Dés honneur des poètes. In it, Péret mapped Vico onto Marx to argue (a) that creative activity was by its nature revolutionary, and (b) that poetry was creation in an ontological sense.

From this position, Péret proceeded to attack those Surrealist poets who joined the PCF, remained in it and used poetry to further the ends of the Party: Louis Aragon, Elsa Triolet, Paul Eluard, Tristan Tzara. The structure of the argument is essentially Trotskyist. The Stalinist Party represented in itself the corruption of the revolution and the creative energy released through it. Real creation (real poetry) is still possible, but only if it first takes aim at those who evoke its language and practices in a false context. Péret’s argument against the Situationists was essentially the same. Ironically, Péret

Substance # 90, 1999
was also associated with SB through his friendship with Véga (Alberto Maso) and Munis. The intent and strategies used in this piece were the same as those Debord would later use to exclude SB from the Left.31

At the level of symbolic conflict, some account had to be settled with Péret. Little separates Péret’s notions of praxis and poetry from the generalized notions of free creative activity that were to be released through the construction of situations. Debord therefore attacked Péret on generational grounds: Péret was old, the Surrealism to which he was committed was largely a cliché. The Situationists were unknown; their worldview not yet hardened into formalized terms. They also claimed to go beyond Surrealism, though their efforts to do so—like Péret’s—were and remained deeply marked by their origin in artistic practice. Situationist positions went beyond Surrealism on two counts, and used the same strategy in each. Surrealist painting was theorized as subversive in the sense that it disrupted the authority of the rational subject by presenting it with “unconscious material.” The viewer would recognize this material indirectly. To thematize this moment of recognition, Surrealists substituted a notion of shock for the Freudian “unheimlich.” Situationists generalized this notion of “shock.” This generalization presupposed a similar expansion of the Dadaist critique of traditional, essentialist definitions of art developed primarily by Duchamp and made explicit through his exhibition of “ready-mades.” If meanings were context-dependent in the specific case of an artwork, then meanings in general could be so viewed.

Early situationist practices were aimed at shifting these tactics out into the domain of the city as a space within which coexisted the pre-arranged spectacle and spaces of play. They conceived of themselves as art-revolutionaries who drifted about cities engaging in “experimental” reappropriation of urban space and operating in public to “construct situations” that would disrupt the “normal” flow of experience. This flow was thematized as context-dependent, and the relevant contexts were objects and events constituted through socially conditioned affect and expectations. Disruption of these frames of reference through the creation of constructed situations demonstrated directly the contingent nature of the “normal” order. This demonstration was itself framed as a negation of that order.

Without the creation of a social space from which to operate, the fashioning of a tactical repertoire and relation to Surrealism would have been useless. Therefore, many articles that appeared in the first three issue of IS are little more than extended lists of what Situationists were not: not Surrealist, not Dada, not modernist, not Arguments, not Henri Lefebvre. The
combination of references adduced in these articles gives a good idea of where the Situs hoped to end up: in the complex intersection of academic, public-intellectual, political and art contexts that had been shaken up by the passivity of the working class and intensification of the Algerian War.

**Discrediting SB**

SB appears in IS no.2’s survey of Leftist organizations. Debord imagined SB as paralyzed before the rapidly changing situation. He analyzed the situation: “The principal lesson that must be drawn is that revolutionary thought must develop a critique of everyday life,” requiring a “new revolutionary organization” capable of locating, thinking, theorizing and empowering new centers/types of social conflict. (IS 2, 10-11) SB was one of the older organizations incapable of measuring up to the task:

Socialisme ou Barbarie, for which the proletariat is a sort of Hidden God of History, congratulates itself with closed eyes for its own disarmament, which can only correspond to a pinnacle of class consciousness, to a too-late liberation from the nefarious influence of parties and trade unions. (IS 2, 10)\(^2\)

This is a well-informed dig. It makes indirect reference to the organizational dispute that split the group during the summer of 1958, and ridicules SB’s attempts to position themselves at the forefront of the new revolutionary movement.

The relationship changed quite abruptly once Blanchard and Debord began to meet and talk. The lead article in IS no.4, “Sur l’emploi du temps libre,” begins by taking over the position that Daniel Blanchard (Canjeurs) had developed in his critique of Alain Touraine in SB no. 27. The referent was Touraine’s article “Situation du mouvement ouvrier” in Arguments no. 12-13, early in 1959.\(^3\) The journal had invited sociologists and political militants to address the future of the revolutionary movement and the meaning of May 1958. Touraine stated that the underlying thesis shared by the sociologists who contributed to the journal\(^4\) was that the traditional working class had ceased to exist Touraine advanced an “embourgeoisement” thesis, according to which the working class only occupied its traditional social place while in the factories: outside, they had been assimilated into the bourgeoisie through consumption. This thesis was attacked by the political militants who published in the issue\(^5\) and again in SB no. 27. The thrust of Blanchard’s argument was that Mallet and Touraine were wrong, because their frames of reference were tied to bourgeois formalism/science.

Substance # 90, 1999
They had no real contact with working people; they needed go to a working-class quartier and look around.\textsuperscript{56}

Debord’s position in “Sur l’emploi...” begins as a variation on Blanchard’s, and then slides to a theoretical position close to that articulated by the American worker newspaper \textit{Correspondence}, one of SB’s most consistent interlocutors through the 1950s. For Debord, the working class continues to function as a class for-itself in a negative manner, through its rejection of the spectacle. Sociologists, invested by their professional nature in the positive/extant as normative, could not be expected to recognize modes of being that threatened the existing order with negation. By positing a negative class consciousness that manifested itself through the wholesale rejection of the dominant culture, Debord was able to superimpose some of his main concerns/categories. Debord argues that, if the workers simply reject the spectacle, then the problem for radical politics is “free time, empty time.” Presumably, the workers experience only cultural dead air because they reject the patterns of acceptable social interaction, without fashioning cultural or political instruments to give content to a different time. The problem would be resolved through revolutionary art:

There is no freedom in the usage of time without possession of the modern instruments for the construction of everyday life. The use of such instruments will mark the leap from a utopian revolutionary art to an experimental revolutionary art. (“Sur l’emploi...” IS No. 4)

In this position, one can see the outline of what will follow. The transition from a vision of revolutionary art to its actualization would result from its “fulfillment” by the revolutionary working class. In this, Debord follows Lukacs, whose \textit{History and Class Consciousness} had only appeared in French translation in 1960 (over the strenuous objections of Lukacs himself). In strategic terms, Lukacs had the advantage of treating the phenomenon of alienation, and of providing an extended gloss on Marxist historical materialism that paradoxically ended up by recasting as transcendent the central categories in Marx’s analysis of capitalist political economy. Just as for Lukacs, orthodox Marxism is an attitude toward history that would be unchanged even if all the theses associated with Marx should be proven wrong, so the working class is an epiphenomenon of the working-out of objective historical laws.\textsuperscript{37} It is therefore a kind of eternally present \textit{deus-ex-machina} that will swing onto the stage of history when the hapless hero capitalism is done in by dialectical forces. Lukacs becomes, for Debord, a fundamental text in his rejection of SB’s claim that there was a crisis of the
Marxist Imaginary, in favor of conceptual closure. Debord uses Lukacs to combine his theories about revolutionary art with a rigid Marxism. This was a position in the internal debates within SB about the status of Marxism, should the positions outlined in Castoriadis’s “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” prove correct.

Preceding avant-gardes have introduced themselves by affirming the excellence of their methods and principles, on the basis of which one should pass immediate judgment on the works. The I.S. is the first artistic organization to found itself on the radical inadequacy of all permitted works, the signification, the success or failure of which will only be judged with the revolutionary practice of its time.

The pattern remains the same through IS no. 8. The lead article for IS no. 5, “L’aventure,” is a more extensive mapping the SB version of the revolutionary project onto instruments of Situationist cultural warfare. One can also see the more gradual importation of the notion of socialism as direct democracy—which would be reduced by May, 1968 to a simple call for the establishment of councils—in the juxtaposition of a quote from Castoriadis’s text on direct democracy, “Sur le contenu du socialisme II” and a Jorn painting. A fair summary of the relationship appears in IS no. 6. Debord’s “Instructions pour une prise d’armes” writes IS into SB’s umbrella organization for a new, international revolutionary movement, counting itself along with the UK Solidarity group, the American Correspondence collective and the Italian Proletarian Unity. A few pages later, one finds spelled out the relation between Situationist and revolutionary modes of critique. The revolutionary movement provides a necessary counter-perspective, relative to which a radicalized critique of the everyday is possible. (IS 6, 26-27) The Situationists were therefore the inadequate art organization whose projects were at once subordinated to and made coherent by the “revolutionary practice of our time” channeled through SB.

This relationship changed again in 1964. During 1963, SB had been consumed by an internal conflict triggered mostly by Castoriadis’s attempt to push to their logical conclusion the implications of his 1959-1961 text. If the working class really had been destructured as a class for itself, and if one plotted this development onto the extended critique of Marxism (politics, economics, theory of history) that SB had pursued since 1946, then there really was not much reason to continue to hold onto Marxism as a frame of reference for thinking about revolution. Revolutionary theory would have to be rethought from the most basic assumptions outward. One would have to work out a core normative theory that was sufficiently abstract to be

Substance # 90, 1999
applicable to social conflicts emerging from various directions. One would also need to multiply the analyses of social conflicts: the working class could no longer provide militants with a template that they could use as a sort of overlay to break a new social movement into its component stages. And one would have to rethink the whole notion of the militant as a function of the definitions of the political arrived at through the reconstruction of revolutionary theory. The debate about these issues split SB down the middle. It revealed the affect with which many SB members invested the idea of being-Marxist, and their reliance on proletarian struggles as a kind of magic key for understanding all social conflict. It also revealed the material limitations for a small group like SB, which found itself confronted with what must have seemed like the call for a 1:1 map of the social world.39

For Debord, this was heresy. With the lead article in IS no. 9, “Maintenant L’I.S.” Debord announced that the Situationist International had assumed SB’s mantle as the revolutionary vanguard (despite SB’s sustained critique of the notion of a “Vanguard Party”). He coupled this with a campaign to throw SB out of the Left. From the outset, Debord had surveyed and resurveyed the Parisian scene, drawing lines that separated what he thought acceptable from what was not. The journal Arguments had long been Debord’s preferred example of empty revisionism: special ridicule was reserved for Edgar Morin and Kostas Axelos. “Argumentiste” was an epithet hurled at former Marxists who gave in to the lure of incoherence once they passed beyond the borders of the Imaginary, patrolled by Guy Debord. In posing the alternative—one can either “be Marxist or be revolutionary”—SB slid from leader of the revolutionary movement into “Argumentiste” revisionism. Despite this banishment, Debord continued his close observation of the group. The IS reproduced (with near-audible glee) an editorial disclaimer that accompanied a review of Christianisme et révolution by Maximillienne Gautrat, as proof of SB’s slide into dilettantism:40

Editorial note: It is perhaps useful to note that, for the vast majority of Socialisme ou Barbarie members, the Kingdom of God is essentially meaningless, and also that they do not see any reason why someone who thinks otherwise should be prevented from self-expression.

Debord’s fiercer sarcasms were directed specifically at Castoriadis:

The revolutionary critique of all existing conditions certainly does not have a monopoly on intelligence, but does on its use. In the present crisis of culture and of society, those who do not have this usage do not, in fact, have any discernible intelligence. Stop talking to us about intelligence.

Substance # 90, 1999
without [correct] usage, it would make us happy. Poor Heidegger! Poor Lukacs! Poor Sartre! Poor Barthes! Poor Lefebvre! Poor Cardan [Castoriadis!]. Tic, tic and tic. Without the proper use of intelligence, one has only the caricatural fragments of innovative ideas, those that could understand the totality of our time and the movement that contests it as well. It is not even clear how to plagiarize these ideas in a harmonious way when one encounters them where they already are. (...)The former specialist of ultra-left politics is dazzled to discover, along with structuralism and psychosociology, an ethnological ideology [that is] entirely new to him: the fact that the Zuni Indians do not have a history seems to him a luminous explanation for his own incapacity to act on our history (go laugh at the first 25 pages of no. 36 of Socialisme ou Barbarie). The specialists of thought can only be thinkers of specialization. We do not pretend to have a monopoly on the dialectic that everyone is talking about; we only claim to have a provisional monopoly on its usage.

The change in the intellectual scene that Debord outlines has a complex conjectural explanation: the end of the Algerian War and the collapse of the radical scene that had developed within the oppositional movement, the return to “normal” everyday life combined with Althusser’s intertwining of structuralism and the dialectical to give the impression that there was a “refreeze” in the Cold War. Debord’s polemical response to this situation, and SB’s role in it, is in part a power play: he was trying to supplant Sartre as the cultural arbiter of the Left.

This culture-broker role was secondary to his desire to personally salvage revolutionary politics. This intention was signaled by direct pronouncement. The strategy amounted to a wholesale incorporation of older SB positions into those of the IS. At the graphics level, IS took the format of SB’s “Le Monde en Question,” which surveyed the press for indications of conflict and/or incoherence within the dominant order (“echoes” as the group called them). From the contents of SB Debord took the call for the formation of councils. If this was the goal—Debord’s politics were, as I have argued, rooted in a subjectivist position—then to salvage revolutionary politics would be to fully externalize the textual collage through which he (Debord) imagined revolution. In trying to become Castoriadis and the revolutionary vanguard, and in his effort to exclude SB from the Left as if the group had been part of the IS, Debord blurred the organizational distinction between inside and outside and the individual distinction between psyche and social world. Debord himself was the oppositional movement: he was what the bourgeois order feared. He was the specter haunting Europe. This sets up a reading of his 1967 book, Society of the Spectacle, as Debord’s attempt to stage, through collage, his subjective organization of the textual material that circulated within the Marxist Imaginary. The book is Debord’s refusal of the crisis of

Substance # 90, 1999
the Imaginary through a retreat into narcissism and a positing of traditional revolutionary Marxism as transcendental. The recourse to the authorized sources of theory was a traditional heretical move within this instituted Imaginary, which presupposed it still operational and capable of renewal. By fashioning this text-collage, Debord tries to map his voice onto that of the Revolutionary Prophet, and in so doing, to mime that role. With this, Debord began his period of “megalomaniac” ambition to be the revolutionary vanguard, which he would later attribute to the Situationists as a group, and which was the basis, in 1972, for his dissolving the organization.\textsuperscript{41}

Conclusion

Socialisme ou Barbarie played a fundamental role in Debord’s evolution from artist to revolutionary to defender of Marxist orthodoxy from heresy. This relationship unfolded at two levels: through direct personal relationship and through the positions SB occupied in the pages of the IS. We have seen the points of compatibility and of dissonance between the two groups, and how Debord’s and SB’s notions of alienation as a conflict between analytic premises led to very different notions of revolution and socialism. Debord’s consumption-based radicalism is similar to arguments made by people in cultural studies today. In mapping the relationship of SB to IS onto a broader crisis of the Marxist Imaginary, I have attempted to show how Debord became a monitor of conceptual closure, unable and unwilling to consider the implications of Fordism and Stalinism in the destruction of the traditional workers’ movement. When SB disintegrated over the problems raised by any effort to cross out of the Marxist Imaginary, Debord reacted by consigning SB to the trash-heap of “Argumentisme” and by making SB categories over into a transcendent theory of history in the image of Lukács. In the 1975 film version of Society of the Spectacle, Debord cut up the text and his own narrative voice and interspersed footage of battles. He could only deal with the collapse of the Imaginary as a strategic defeat.

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NOTES

1. There is an extensive bibliography on the Situationists and Guy Debord. Berreby’s *Documents* is full of reproductions of material (paintings, installations, journals, ephemera) produced by the Lettristes in their various combinations and guises. The standard English-language references include Marcus, 1989, which builds on earlier work like Hebidge, 1995 in its linkage of Situationist practices to punk. See also Sadie Plant, 1992. This article relies primarily on the journal *L’Internationale Situationniste* and on other works by Debord including *Oeuvres Cinématographiques Complètes 1952-1978, Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle, Panégyrique, Society of the Spectacle.*

2. The Situationiste Internationale was involved in several different political contexts and its reception was different in each of them: it was not exclusively Parisian group, nor synonymous with Guy Debord.

3. See “Interview with Henri Lefebvre” on NOT BORED! website. The bibliography on Surrealist politics in the 1920s-1930s is extensive: see Thirion, 1975.

4. The organization was not a unitary bloc of people: one of the main divisions among them was the break with art. From Asger Jorn to Constant to the “evil Nashites,” most who left did so because they wanted to continue producing some kind of art. Debord abandoned filmmaking from 1961 to 1975.

5. Thanks to David Ames Curtis for this formulation.

6. For an explanation of this term, see my Introduction to Hastings-King 1998.

7. The terms representation, intention and affect are taken from Castoriadis, *Philosophy,* 33-46.

8. See the survey article by Pierre Broué in *Arguments.* Sartre’s “Le fantôme de Staline” appeared in the January, 1957 issue of *Les Temps Modernes* and argued that Poland, not Hungary, revealed the “essential nature” of the crisis triggered by the XXth Party Congress because Poland, and Gomulksism in particular, represented the possibility of reform from within the Party. Sartre’s political position of the time would not allow for any radical challenge to the notion of the Party itself, which was one dimension of SB’s reading of the Hungarian Revolt. Much ink was spent in the “progressiste” press (*L’Express, France Observateur, Les Temps Modernes*) during 1957-1958 searching for the reformist factions within the PCF.

9. Castoriadis’s notion that SB simply “followed the bureaucratic string” is cited in Howard 1988.

10. Mothé was the pseudonym for Jacques Gautrat, a machinist at the Renault factory at Billancourt, an important writer for SB, and of enormous symbolic and political importance for the group in his role as The Worker. See my “Reading Mothé,” in Hastings-King 1998.

11. These tensions are explored at length in Hastings-King, 1998, ch. 2-5.

12. Blanchard, forthcoming. Unpaginated email printout, cited with permission. In SB, Blanchard acted and wrote under the pseudonym Canjuers, which was a place not far from where he grew up. He was part of SB from 1957 until its dissolution in 1966 and struggled to come to terms with what SB meant when he was in it and afterward. Of the SB members I interviewed in 1991-1992, he was probably the most deeply affected by the group’s dissolution. Blanchard’s article is interesting both for its personal detail about both himself and Debord and for what the author has constructed between himself in the present and his past. The sense of distance is indicated by the persistent underwater imagery, which reads as though the whole scene were now some kind of drowned city or Atlantis, or as if the clandestine world of revolutionary politics were like the deepest trenches of the ocean where the intense water pressures enable bizarre creatures to survive that could not do so under more normal circumstances. The scene is also regarded with

Substance # 90, 1999
great fondness, and remembered with precision. (“The strangeness was not uncanny, but rather attractive, incredibly enticing.”)

13. This text has a complex genealogy. The final version is published in English in Castoriadis, 1988, vol. 2.

14. Just as SB would try to do with the American Civil Rights and student movements during the early 1960s.

15. When Castoriadis presented the implications of his position explicitly to the group in 1963, this precipitated the breakdown of SB as a group. See “Pour une nouvelle orientation” and “Récommencer la révolution.” The former circulated internally; the latter was published in SB no. 35, 1-36. Both are translated in Castoriadis, vol. 3, 1993. I will return to this point below.

16. Originally published in an expensive and striking-looking version designed by Debord in July, 1960. Its publication was announced in IS no. 5 (decembre, 1960) p. 11. Reprinted by “Notes et Critiques,” a group loosely associated with SB in Bordeaux as “Le capitalisme: société sans culture,” along with an unpublished 2/61 text “Pour un jugement révolutionnaire de l’art” (an extended critique on a review of Godard’s A bout de souffle that appeared in SB no. 31. It appears with a note as to origin.) My thanks to Daniel Blanchard for a copy of the original tract, and to Alain Guillem (by way of David Ames Curtis) for the “Notes et Critiques” version.

17. The translation of this quote and the following are mine.

18. Blanchard was not alone in not taking Castoriadis’s arguments immediately as the basis for his politics at this time. In 1963, he sided with Castoriadis in the split with Lyotard, Souyri and Maso over the centrality of Marxism to revolutionary theory, and stayed in SB until the end.

19. As an alternative to mandatory military service, which would have meant Algeria.

20. Pierre Guillaume, “Debord” on NOT BORED! Translation of an article originally published in Guillaume’s journal La Vieille Taupe no. 1 (Spring 1995). He provides information on Debord’s resignation from SB not available from other sources. However, his gloss on the information is highly particular, conditioned by his analysis of his own experience. It should be noted that any use Guillaume’s text is complicated by his revisionism (denial of the Holocaust). He turns his relationship to Debord to its service: he appropriates the “public enemy number one” persona and uses it to legitimate his politics, and spends much of the latter part of the article intimating that at least some of the old Situationists approve of this appropriation, as if to say that such approval makes Guillaume a legitimate heir to Debord.


22. See Guillaume, “Debord” and Alternatif from Castoriadis papers, SB 16:10.

23. In the internal documents that I have gathered from SB, Debord only speaks two or three times, most of them at the “Nationale Meeting” just before he resigned.

24. “A big name for a little thing” according to Guillaume.

25. BI no. 25, 12. See Hastings-King, 1998 Ch. 4 and 5. Guy is Debord.

26. On Mothé see note 8. Philippe Guillaume was Cyrille Rousseau de Beauplan, who joined while the group was still an oppositional tendency in the PCI. A veteran militant with a complex family history, Guillaume had decided after May 1958 to quit his post as an economist at the OECD and to take factory jobs in order to be “with the workers.” For these and other reasons, he was considered by many to be the group’s heart and conscience.
28. This from David Ames Curtis as a paraphrase of Philippe Potetraux.
29. Péret wrote a dismissive article in the small surrealist periodical Bief that prompted an equally dismissive response. He was in failing health by this point, but his symbolic position was still central. Debord’s “Les souvenirs au-dessous de tout” is in IS no.2, 3-4 (1997, 34-35).
31. It is interesting in this regard to note that when Péret died, SB published “Le déshonneur” with an introduction by Jean-Jacques Lebel.
32. The reference is to the Castoriadis-Lefort/ILO split over the question of organization in September 1958.
33. See the section, “Qu’est-ce que la classe ouvrière française?” in Arguments no. 12-13 (Janvier-Mars, 1959). Complete re-edition of the journal was done by Privat in 1983 under the supervision of Olivier Corpet and Mariateresa Padova. Touraine’s “Situation de la classe ouvrière” is on pages 5-15.
34. These were Serge Mallet and Michel Crozier.
35. Including SB’s Daniel Mothé and the syndicalist Michel Collinet.
37. See “What is Orthodox Marxism” and “Class Consciousness” in Lukacs, 1968.
38. See bottom of IS no. 5, 47.
39. See Véga and Lyotard responses to CC.
41. “L’Internationale Situationniste est constituée nominalement, mais cela ne signifie rien que le début d’une tentative pour construire au-delà de la décomposition, dans laquelle nous sommes entièrement compris, comme tout le monde [...]. Ce n’est pas grand-chose d’être actuel: on n’est que plus ou moins décomposé. La nouveauté est maintenant entièrement dépendante d’un saut à un niveau supérieur[...]. Nos ambitions sont nettement mégalomanes, mais peut-être pas mesurables aux critères dominants de la réussite.” From “Encore un effort si vous voulez être situationistes—L’I.S. dans et contre la décomposition” in Potlach 29 (November 5, 1957), quoted in “En guise d’introduction” to the 1997 re-edition of IS., ix.

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Substance # 90, 1999
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