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Now, the SI

■ KEN KNABB (TRANSLATION) ■
SITUATIONISTISCHE INTERNATIONALE

Each era forges its own human material, and if our era really needed theoretical works it would itself create the forces necessary for its satisfaction.

— Rosa Luxemburg,
in *Vorwärts* (14 March 1903)

Now that the situationists already have a history and their activity has carved out a very particular but undeniably central role for itself in the cultural debates of the last few years, some people reproach the SI for having succeeded and others reproach it for having failed.

In order to understand the real significance of these terms, as well as almost all the intellectual establishment's judgments concerning the SI, it is first necessary to *reverse* them. The SI's element of failure is what is commonly considered to be its success — the artistic value that is beginning to be appreciated in us; the fact that certain of our theses have come to be sociologically or urbanistically fashionable; or simply the personal success that is virtually guaranteed to any situationist the moment he is excluded from the SI. Our element of success, which is more profound, is the fact that we have resisted the mass of compromises that we have been offered; the fact that we have not clung to our original pilot program but have proved that its main avant-garde character, in spite of some other more apparent ones, lay in the fact that *it had to lead further*; and the fact that we have thus far been refused any recognition within the established framework of the present order.

We have undoubtedly made many mistakes. We have often corrected or abandoned them, although it was precisely among them that were found the elements which were succeeding or for which the greatest aid was offered to bring them to fruition. It is easy to note the shortcomings in our earliest publications — the extravagant verbiage, the fantasies left over from the old artistic milieu, the holdovers from the old politics; it is, moreover, in the light of the SI's later conclusions that these earlier shortcomings are most easily criticizable. An inverse factor has naturally left less trace in our writings, but has weighed heavily on us: a nihilist abstentionism, a serious inability among many of us to think and act beyond the first stammerings of positive dialogue. This lack is almost always accompanied by the most abstract and pretentious insistence on a disembodied radicalism.

There is, however, a deviation that has threatened us more gravely than all the others: it was the risk of not differentiating ourselves clearly enough from the *modern* tendencies of explanations and proposals regarding the new society to which capitalism has brought us — tendencies which, behind different masks, all lead to integration into this society. Since Constant's interpretation of unitary urbanism this tendency has been expressed within the SI, and it is incomparably more dangerous than the old artistic conception we have fought so much. It is more modern and therefore less obvious, and certainly has a more promising future. Our project has taken shape at the *same time* as the modern tendencies toward integration. There is thus not only a direct opposition between them but also an air of resem-

blance, since the two sides are really contemporaneous. We have not paid enough attention to this aspect, even recently. Thus, it is not impossible to interpret Alexander Trocchi's proposals in issue #8 of this journal [*A Revolutionary Proposal*] as having some affinity — despite their obviously completely contrary spirit — with those poor attempts at a “psychodramatic” salvaging of decomposed art expressed for example by the ridiculous “Workshop of Free Expression” in Paris last May. But the point we have arrived at clarifies both our project and, inversely, the project of integration. All really modern non-revolutionary ventures must now be recognized and treated as our number-one enemy. They are going to reinforce all existing controls.

We must not for all that abandon the extreme point of the modern world merely so as to avoid resembling it in any way, or even in order not to teach it anything that could be used against us. It is quite natural that our enemies succeed in partially using us. We are neither going to leave the present field of culture to them nor mix with them. The armchair advisors who want to admire and understand us from a respectful distance readily recommend to us the purity of the first attitude while they adopt the second one. We reject this suspect formalism: like the proletariat, we cannot claim to be unexploitable in the present conditions; the best we can do is to work to make any such exploitation entail the greatest possible risk for the exploiters. The SI has taken a clear stand as an alternative to the dominant culture, and particularly to its so-called avant-garde forms. The situationists consider that they must succeed to art

— which is dead — and to separate philosophical reflection — whose corpse no one, despite all the present efforts, will succeed in “reviving” — because the *spectacle* that is replacing this art and this thought is itself the heir of *religion*. And just as was the “critique of religion” (a critique that the present Left abandoned at the same time it abandoned all thought and action), the critique of the spectacle is today the precondition for any critique.

The path of total police control over all human activities and the path of unlimited free creation of all human activities are one: it is the same path of modern discoveries. We are necessarily on the same path as our enemies — most often preceding them — but we must be there, without any confusion, *as enemies*. The best will win.

The present era can test innumerable innovations, but it is incapable of putting them to good use because it is chained to the fundamental conservation of an old order. Over and over, in all our innovating formulations, we must stress the need for a revolutionary transformation of society.

The revolutionary critique of all existing conditions does not, to be sure, have a monopoly on intelligence; it only has a monopoly on its use. In the present cultural and social crisis, those who do not know how to use their intelligence have in fact no discernable intelligence of any kind. Stop talking to us about unused intelligence and you’ll make us happy. Poor Heidegger! Poor Lukács! Poor Sartre! Poor Barthes! Poor Lefebvre! Poor Cardan! Tics, tics, and tics. Lacking the method for using their intelligence, they end up with nothing but caricatural fragments of the innovating ideas that can simultaneously comprehend and contest the totality of our era. They are not only incapable of developing ideas, they don’t even know how to skillfully plagiarize ideas developed by others. Once the specialized thinkers step out of their own domain, they can only be the dumbfounded spectators of some neighboring and equally bankrupt specialization of which they were previously ignorant but which has become fashionable. The former specialist of ultraleftist politics [Cornelius Castoriadis, aka Cardan] is awestruck at discovering, along with structuralism

and social psychology, an ethnological ideology completely new to him: the fact that the Zuni Indians did not have any history appears to him as a luminous explanation for his own inability to act in our history. (Go laugh at the first twenty-five pages of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* #36.) The specialists of thought can no longer be anything but thinkers of specialization. We don’t claim to have a monopoly on the dialectics that everyone talks about; we only claim to have a temporary monopoly on its *use*.

Some people still venture to object to our theories by gravely insisting on the necessity of practice, although those who speak at this level of methodological delirium have abundantly revealed their own inability to carry out the slightest practice. When revolutionary theory reappears in our time and can count only on itself to propagate itself *through a new practice*, it seems to us that this is already an important beginning of practice. This theory is at the outset caught in the framework of the new educated ignorance propagated by the present society, and is much more radically cut off from the masses than it was in the nineteenth century. We naturally share its isolation, its risks, and its fate.

To approach us one should therefore not already be compromised, and should be aware that even if we may be momentarily mistaken on many minor points, we will never admit having been mistaken in our *negative* judgment of persons. Our qualitative criteria are much too certain for us to debate them. There is no point in approaching us if one is not theoretically and practically in agreement with our condemnations of contemporary persons or currents. Some of the thinkers who are now going to plan and justify modern society have already justified and *ultimately conserved* more archaic forms of it when they were, for example, Stalinists. Now, without batting an eye, they are going to reenlist, just as coolly and cheerily as before, for a second debacle. Others, who fought them during the preceding phase, are now joining them in a common celebration of innovation. All the specializations of illusion can be taught and discussed by the tenured thinkers. But the situationists take their

stand in the knowledge that is outside this spectacle: we are not thinkers sponsored by the state.

We have to organize a coherent encounter between the elements of critique and negation (whether as acts or as ideas) that are now scattered around the world; and between these critical and negative elements that have become conscious and the entire life of the bearers of them; and finally, between the people or the first groups that are at this level of intellectual knowledge and practical contestation. The coordination of these researches and struggles on the most practical plane (a new international linkup) is now inseparable from a coordination on the most theoretical plane (which will be expressed by several works presently being prepared by some of the situationists). For example, the present issue of this journal, in order to better explain aspects of our theses that have sometimes been presented too abstractly, gives a large place to a coherent presentation of items drawn from the ordinary daily news. The continuation of our projects will have to be expressed in fuller forms. This continuation will considerably exceed what we would have been able to undertake by ourselves.

While contemporary impotence blathers on about the belated project of “getting into the twentieth century,” we think it is high time to eliminate the *dead time* that has dominated this century and to put an end to the Christian Era with the same stroke. Here as elsewhere, the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. Ours is the best effort so far toward *getting out of the twentieth century*.

Situationist International: Situationistisch / Situationist: All das, was sich auf die Theorie oder auf die praktische Tätigkeit von Situationen bezieht. Derjenige, der sich damit beschäftigt, Situationen zu konstruieren. Mitglied der situationistischen Internationale.

Situationismus: Sinnloses Wort, missbräuchlich durch Ableitung des vorigen gebildet. Einen Situationismus gibt es nicht — was eine Doktrin zur Interpretation der vorhandenen Tatsachen bedeuten würde. Selbstver-

ständig haben sich die Anti-Situationisten den Begriff „Situationismus“ ausgedacht.

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