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"REVOLUTION OR DEATH"

The Situationist International, Capitalism and Communication

By: Michel Luc Bellemare

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts

Department of Mass Communication
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
August 1st,
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The Situationist International, Capitalism and Communication

submitted by Michel Luc Bellemare, B.A.
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Two handwritten signatures are present, each on a line of dashed text. The top signature is written over the word "Chair". The bottom signature is written over the words "Thesis Supervisor".

Carleton University
August 1st, 2001

ABSTRACT

Although short lived, from 1957 to 1972, the Situationist International was a formative socio-political movement that influenced Post-World-War II cultural and political debates. Despite being based in Paris, its influential ideas and practices have spread throughout popular culture and the world in the form of the Anti-Globalization Movement, Terrorist Movements and the Green parties. Consequently, the movement's practices and ideas, without being recognized, have become widely used and widely accepted. As a result, the focus of this study is to closely examine the Situationist International's theoretical ideas and cultural practices most clearly expressed in its journals, Guy Debord's book The Society of the Spectacle, and its actions before, during and after the events of May 68. The significance of the Situationist International to the study of communication is that its cultural practices, its political actions and its socio-economic critique of our image/information culture have transformed contemporary debates on art, power, capitalism, revolution and everyday life.

Acknowledgements and Preface

First and foremost, I would like to take the time to thank my initial supervisor Michael Dorland, whose guidance, insights and smooth demeanor kept me focused, on my toes and delving deeper into the subject matter, thank you. Secondly, I would like to thank my current supervisor, Vincent Mosco, who was gracious enough to take time away from his busy schedule on such short notice to supervise me; it is extremely appreciated, thank you. In addition, I would like to thank Vincent for his compassionate, honest, and critical analysis of Michael Denning's Cultural Front and Naomi Klein's No Logo. It gave me the needed push towards an oppositional stance; I finally fully realized just how far movements need to go in order to subvert the dominant hegemony. Thirdly, I would like to thank Ross Eaman for his valuable time and for being my second reader, thank you. Also, I would like to personally thank my girlfriend Melodie, whose patience, loving care and intellectual support has kept me sane and determined these past few months. I couldn't have done it without you babe. As well, I would like to thank Guy Debord, Karl Marx, the Situationists and the Frankfurt School, whose critical analysis and political actions have shaped modern thought and allowed me to view the world in a whole different light. I believe that all theories, books or theses must strive to achieve the influence these thinkers continue to exert, as progress requires it. Last but not least, I would like to give special thanks to Melissa, who had the lucky chance of editing my first draft; thank you very much, and I wish you all the success on your thesis.

Before we begin, it is vital that I explain certain aspects of this study. Foremost, the title was chosen because it was one of the Situationist International's popular graffiti slogans and because it was reflective of the S. I.'s political stance during its years of operation. Secondly, it is important to note that in all probability the Situationist International would have disapproved of my endeavor since the group would have considered this thesis an attempt to recuperate its radical critique into the dominant hegemony and its institutions. However, in response to the S. I.'s accusations, I refer to the S. I.'s own cultural practices and its own socio-economic theory. Its cultural practices were direct experiments with previous avant-garde techniques which they eventually elaborated upon after extensive study. In addition, the S. I.'s own theory stipulates that for ideas to improve, old ideas need to be revisited, studied and expanded as "progress demands it. . . and as improvements erase false ideas and replace them with correct ideas". Consequently, since my study of the S. I. strives to do exactly this I think that this thesis is vindicated from such accusations. In the spirit of the S. I., I have approached this sensitive subject matter with an emphasis on *originality*, *innovation*, *honesty* and *meticulousness* in order to stay true to the S. I.'s principles and its critique of capitalism.

Furthermore, it is important that I mention that what initially attracted me to the Situationist International was the group's aesthetic artworks and the individual histories of its members. I first stumbled upon the S. I. three years ago when I was an undergrad at Trent University. A local film theater, specializing in foreign pictures, decided to show a few of Debord's avant-garde films. Intrigued by this experience and learning that the S. I. also experimented in art, I proceeded to search out more material of the movement since, as a painter,

I am always interested in innovative art. Consequently, I found strong similarities in the S. I.'s aesthetic techniques and the way I was painting, especially concerning its idea that art and politics go hand in hand. Anyway, finding my own political stance becoming increasingly radicalized, I slowly began delving into the S. I.'s theory, political writings and its political activities; this was about the time, I entered Carleton's communication program. In the program, I was able to refine my ideas concerning the S. I.'s theory and to a large extent this thesis is the product of this.

Secondly, what attracted me to the S. I. was the individual histories of its members. What I mean by this is that these individuals were initially street kids living on the streets of Paris in the early fifties. They were dropouts, misfits, scam artists and thieves who eventually found solace in the avant-gardes and the French communist party. In fact, many of the 1930's surrealists mentored these misfits and supported them both intellectually and financially. For example, the S. I. publications were financed by Asger Jorn, whose artwork by the late fifties was known world-wide. Also, Henri Lefebvre, an ex-surrealist, allowed Guy Debord, an S. I. member, to audit his university courses and to stay with him at his country estate. These prominent supporters, who gave their valuable time intellectually and financially to nourish these young individuals provided the necessary basis for a movement like the S. I. to take root. The fact that an S. I. member like Debord, who never received an orthodox education and who lived in poverty his whole life, was able to publish a book like The Society of the Spectacle, makes his theoretical contribution that much more remarkable and special.

From my perspective, the S. I. is appealing because it was first and foremost uncompromising towards the dominant hegemony, striving to dissolve it and attempting to implement open democracy; a democracy where public participation in decision making is maximized and a democracy where people actively create and participate in their equality and their culture. As a result, this study is my attempt to understand the theory, cultural practices, political actions and the dissolution of an oppositional/counter-cultural group called the Situationist International.

Michel Luc Bellemare
Ottawa, Canada
July 14th, 2001

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Introduction

Culture, Hegemony and a brief synopsis of the Situationist International and its Significance

Although short lived, from 1957 to 1972, the Situationist International was a formative socio-political movement that influenced Post-World-War II cultural and political debates. Despite being based in Paris, its influential ideas and practices have spread throughout popular culture and the world in the form of the Anti-Globalization Movement, Terrorist Movements and the Green parties. Consequently, the movement's practices and ideas, without being recognized, have become widely used and widely accepted. As a result, the focus of this study is to closely examine the Situationist International's theoretical ideas and cultural practices most clearly expressed in its journals, Guy Debord's book The Society of the Spectacle, and its actions before, during and after the events of May 68. The significance of the Situationist International to the study of communication is that its cultural practices, its political actions and its socio-economic critique of our image/information culture have transformed contemporary debates on art, power, capitalism, revolution and everyday life.

When examining a socio-political movement such as the Situationist International, questions one is confronted with are, how does one theorize it? What methodology does one use when dealing with this sort of unorthodox subject matter, given that different socio-political movements have various aims and focuses? Answering these questions is the first step in understanding how socio-political movements develop and function in contrast to each other and the dominant ideology. First and foremost, social scientists have too often lumped together and

subsumed all post-war movements under the notion of “the new left”. As a result, various political and cultural movements such as Ecological Movements, Women’s Movements, Peace Movements, Terrorist Movements, Anti-Globalization Movements, Gay and Lesbian Movements etc., which all have different focuses and aims, have been marginalized under such a broad and oversimplified term. In order to clarify these categorical questions I refer to Sabine Von Dirke’s book, All Power to the Imagination, and Todd Gitlin’s book, The Whole World Is Watching, since each uses a similar theoretical framework to understand social movements.

Foremost, Gitlin and Von Dirke’s methodology consist of categorizing socio-political movements using key terms such as culture, hegemony, oppositional/counter-cultural movements and alternative/sub-cultural movements. Primarily these terms will give us a conceptual framework for understanding the Situationist International throughout the rest of the analysis. Von Dirke, referring to Raymond Williams’ analysis of culture, argues that there are two different notions of what a culture is. She argues that the first definition of culture is unsatisfactory because it is “frequently employed in a narrow manner to refer only to the manifestations of the ‘cultivation of the mind,’ as in ‘arts and human intellectual work’”¹. She states this definition is too close to aesthetic and literary disciplines and does not take into account the institutional influences on culture. For this reason, Von Dirke subscribes to Raymond Williams’ second broader definition of culture:

culture as the peculiar and distinctive ‘way of life’ of a group or class, the meanings,

¹ Sabine Von Dirke, All Power to the Imagination (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 2.

values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life. Culture is the distinctive shapes in which this material and social organization of life expresses itself. .

.Culture is the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped: but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted.²

The reason Von Dirke uses this latter definition is because of its emphasis on institutional processes that influence culture and the experiences individuals have within a culture.

Furthermore, Von Dirke believes this definition allows for the view that a “society [is] not . . . a homogenous entity but. . . a collection of various social groups, which develop distinct cultures and struggle with each other for dominance”³. For Von Dirke, the social groups that eventually gain dominance can be characterized as possessing a “hegemony”.

The concept of hegemony originates with Antonio Gramsci who described the term in his Prison Notebooks during his imprisonment in Italy from 1929 to 1935. After the Second-World-War, Gramsci’s notion found widespread appeal among Marxist thinkers because it theorized why the working class had not seized control and had instead become increasingly integrated within capitalism’s social order and its economic system. Drawing from Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, Von Dirke states that:

In contrast to coercive domination, hegemony represents rule through consent. The ruling class or configuration of ruling social groups succeeds in establishing a framework of ideas, beliefs, and values, which it disseminates through the various institutions of civil society, such as the educational system, the church, and the media. Thus the ruling elites mold the majority’s worldviews, interests, and desires according to their own. The ruling

² Ibid, 2.

³ Ibid, 3.

classes appear more as leaders than as oppressors because they have convinced the majority to follow them.⁴

For Gramsci and Von Dirke, the notion of integration is the cornerstone of hegemony. It is this form of power and control that characterizes the way a capitalist society dismantles working-class solidarity and consolidates its rule over them.

Similarly, Todd Gitlin subscribes to Gramsci's definition of hegemony. Also, referring to Raymond Williams, Gitlin's book states that hegemony is "a whole body of practices and expectations. . . [that] constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society. . . hegemonic ideology enters into everything people do and think is 'natural'-- in every sphere of social activity, [hegemony] meshes with common sense"⁵. Like Von Dirke and Gramsci, Gitlin states that:

those who rule the dominant institutions secure their power in large measure directly and indirectly, by impressing their definitions of the situation upon those they rule. . . limiting what is thought throughout the society. . . [thus] Hegemony. . . is . . . active. . . operating through a complex web of social activities and institutional procedures. Hegemony is done by the dominant and collaborated in by the dominated.⁶

Both Gitlin and Von Dirke believe that since the 1960's, society has increasingly become polarized due to conflicts of hegemonic control that have begun to appear on all levels of society. However, because of this polarization, according to Von Dirke, "the dominant classes [while]

⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁵ Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching (Berkeley, California: University of California, 1980) 10.

⁶ Ibid, 10.

retain[ing] power. . . [their] control is progressively challenged, weakened [and] exhausted”⁷ by other subordinate classes and movements. Consequently in response to these social pressures, the dominant hegemony uses the mass media both to marginalize subordinate groups and to create consent for itself.

For example, examining the media’s effect on the Student For A Democratic Society (SDS) movement in the United-States, Todd Gitlin argues that although the SDS movement exerted a powerful influence on the dominant hegemony with its new ideas, it was eventually trivialized, polarized and marginalized within the new mental spaces of the American mass media. According to Gitlin, since its rise, the mass media has increasingly “specialize[d] in orchestrating everyday consciousness by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility [and] their centralized symbolic capacity”⁸. As a result Gitlin states the mass media has become an important tool of hegemonic control since “[an] important task for [any dominant] ideology is to define--and also define away--its opposition”⁹. Consequently, for Gitlin, the SDS was marginalized through the mass media by the dominant hegemony due to the fact that it was an oppositional force that was challenging its hegemonic authority.

Additionally, both Gitlin and Von Dirke argue that hegemony is never permanent. It must continually create consent by integrating and marginalizing opposing groups and ideas so that it may continue to sustain its dominance. For example, Gitlin states that because

⁷ Sabine Von Dirke, All Power to the Imagination (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 3.

⁸ Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980) 2.

⁹ Ibid, 2.

people only partially. . . accept the hegemonic terms; they stretch, dispute and . . . struggle to transform the hegemonic ideology, . . . therefore, its contents shift to certain degree, as the desires and strategies of the top institutions shift, and different coalitions form among the dominant social groups; in turn these desires and strategies are modified, moderated by popular currents. . . [For instance] in. . . capitalist society. . . schools and the mass media specialize in formulating and conveying national ideology. At the same time, indirectly, the media. . . [takes] certain popular currents and pressures, incorporat[es], repackag[es] and distribut[es] them across society.¹⁰

As a result, Gitlin states that various movements occasionally surface based on people's similar sufferings and discontents towards the dominant hegemony. These movements slowly begin to demand a variety of reforms and attempt to carve niches for themselves within the dominant hegemony. For this reason, Gitlin classifies movements as either alternative or oppositional, depending on their position to the dominant ideology. For example, an alternative movement is defined by the fact that it does not directly oppose the dominant hegemony, but instead attempts to create a space for itself within the dominant hegemony. An oppositional movement challenges the dominant hegemony and attempts to subvert it. Consequently, a movement is considered oppositional when it "challenge[s] the main structures and ideas of the existing order: the preeminence of the corporate economy, the militarized state, and authoritarian social relations as whole"¹¹.

Similarly, Von Dirke argues that although a "hegemony [appears] . . . stable [it is] always contested, not only by various classes but . . . by sub- and counter-cultural [movements]"¹². Like Gitlin, she classifies subordinate groups or movements as either sub-cultural or counter-cultural.

¹⁰ Ibid, 10-11.

¹¹ Ibid, 11.

¹² Sabine Von Dirke, All Power to the Imagination (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 4.

Analogous to Gitlin's dichotomy between alternative and oppositional movements, Von Dirke classifies sub-cultural movements as movements which coexist more easily within the dominant hegemony because they do not directly contest it, while she classifies counter-cultural movements as movements that increasingly conflict with the dominant hegemony, ultimately striving for its complete negation:

Counterculture [movements] position themselves explicitly and fundamentally against their dominant counterpart and try to develop an alternative way of life. They challenge the hegemonic culture with a holistic approach, negating all of its values and traditions and struggling for radical and comprehensive change. In contrast, subcultures can coexist more easily with the hegemonic culture, since they do not stand in fundamental opposition to it. Members of subcultures relate to the hegemonic culture differently, particularly regarding work and leisure time. They accept the standards of the hegemonic culture with respect to work time, but not with respect to their leisure time. Subcultures do not call for or work towards a transformation of society.¹³

Within both Gitlin's and Von Dirke's conceptual framework, movements that strive for fundamental political and social transformation and attempt to subvert the dominant hegemony in a holistic way are considered oppositional/counter-cultural, while movements attempting to carve out a niche for themselves within the dominant hegemony are considered alternative/sub-cultural. Consequently, this study will approach the Situationist International as an oppositional/counter-cultural movement due to the fact that all of its practices, actions and its socio-economic critique are aimed at the total negation of the dominant capitalist hegemony.

In the opening statement of his collage book titled Mémoire, published in 1957 shortly

¹³ Ibid. 4.

after the inception of the Situationist International, Guy Debord wrote that the primary foundation of the S. I. is that “we think the world must change”¹⁴. Debord’s statement clearly places the S. I. within Gitlin and Von Dirke’s conceptual framework as a oppositional/counter-cultural movement. More importantly, this powerful statement is ground zero for the Situationist International; everything the S. I. did and wrote stemmed from this foundation as it increasingly dedicated itself to the total subversion of capitalist society. Even as the movement endured mutations, separations, and resignations between its members and its own ideas, the S. I.’s commitment to a position of uncompromising opposition to the capitalist hegemony remained unfailing.

Before I begin the study, a brief outline of the movement is needed. The Situationist International was founded on June 8, 1957, in a small town in northern Italy called Cosio d’Arroscia. The group was originally an avant-garde movement composed of a union of Lettrist International and Cobra members, who shared an affinity for the use of art to revolutionize people’s lives. Although the S. I.’s membership fluctuated throughout its years of operation, at its inception the movement was composed of seven members. Its primary members were Asger Jorn and Constant A. Nieuwenhuis from Cobra and Guy Debord and Michèle Bernstein from the Lettrist International. Other members, including Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio from the Imaginist Bahauss, comprised the periphery of the group. By 1962, the membership grew to approximately thirty members, depending on the year. Nonetheless, the S. I.’s members were scattered

¹⁴ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 164.

throughout Europe during its early years in such countries as Germany, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Holland, Belgium and France.

After suffering a break-up of the various factions in 1962 due to the increasing radicalization and politicization of the French members, the Situationist International was reorganized into two different groups, the Situationist Bauhaus composed of expelled artists and the French S. I. composed of theorists based in Paris. Due to the limited scope of this study, I will strictly focus on the French Situationist International since its theory and its actions before, during and after the events of May 68 had a lasting impact on subsequent political movements (see Conclusion). The reorganized S. I., now based strictly out of Paris, would begin to acquire new members after 1966 with its participation in the Strasbourg University scandal (see Chapter 2). Although these new supporters were primarily composed of students who were never official S. I. members, and who were consequently dubbed “Pro-Situs” because they were sympathetic to the S. I. ’s principles, the Situationist International continued to grow. In fact, after the events of May 68, the S. I. became an International movement again with burgeoning membership of around 30 members who were scattered within its newly formed sections located in Italy, Scandinavia and America. However, in 1972, with its numbers and its popularity steadily growing across Europe, the movement dissolved itself for several reasons. Firstly it increasingly felt it was not equipped to deal with such a high number of members. Secondly, the original S. I. members felt the movement was now compromising its main principles, the total subversion of capitalist society, since its theories were increasingly recuperated by capitalism for commodity purposes and used against the S. I. itself. Thirdly, many members in the movement felt the S. I. was becoming a media

commodity.

Nonetheless, the impact of Situationist International's cultural practices, political action and its socio-economic critique is extensive. For instance, Naomi Klein's recent book No Logo, pays homage to the S. I. and its practices when she argues that the anti-globalization's practice of "culture jamming" derives from the S. I.'s practice of détournement. Klein states that

It was Guy Debord and the Situationists, the muses and theorists of the theatrical student uprising of Paris, May 1968, who first articulated the power of a simple détournement, defined as an image, message or artifact lifted out of its context to create a new meaning. . . culture jammers borrow liberally from . . . Situationism . . . [although] the canvas these art revolutionaries were attacking tended to be the art world and its passive culture of spectatorship . . . [while] culture jamming is anything. . . that mixes art, media, parody and the outsider stance.¹⁵

Despite the fact that Klein fails to recognize that after 1962 the S. I. negated art and became a radical revolutionary organization bent on instigating a political "revolution that [would] be social as well as cultural. . . whose field of action [would] be broader than. . . any of its previous tentatives"¹⁶, she does grasp one of the S. I.'s important contributions with "détournement". However to fully comprehend the Situationist International's cultural and political contributions, we must first understand its historical and theoretical roots from its inception in 1957 to its dissolution in 1972. Understanding this will allow us to trace the evolution of the movement and its critical tenets, its significance, and finally its influences on subsequent movements.

Due to the enormous amounts of material and the S. I.'s extensive theory and actions, this

¹⁵ Naomi Klein, No Logo (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000) 282-283.

¹⁶ Guy Debord, "Instructions for Taking Up Arms," Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knapp (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 64.

study will be divided into five chapters, each dealing with a specific area of the Situationist International. Chapter one will strictly deal the historical roots of the movement where I will argue that the S. I. was a critical elaboration of previous avant-garde movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Cobra and Lettrist International; its objective during this period was an attempt to unify art and everyday life in the hopes of achieving a revolution of everyday life. In chapter two, I will argue that after bringing art into everyday life with moderate successes, the French section of the S. I. became increasingly radical and politicized. In fact, after 1962, the S. I. became a revolutionary organization; it expelled artists and focused on both a socio-economic critique of capitalism and on promoting political revolution. I will conclude this chapter by examining the theoretical relationship between the S. I. and Henri Lefebvre, arguing that Lefebvre influenced many of the S. I.'s ideas such as "the revolution of everyday life" and "détournement".

In chapter three, I will extensively examine Guy Debord's socio-economic critique of capitalism expressed in his book The Society of the Spectacle. Firstly in this chapter, I will relate Debord's socio-economic critique to Hegel, Marx, and the Frankfurt School. Secondly, I will show that Debord's critique and his notion of the spectacle have transformed debates on capitalism, power, mass communication and everyday life. I will do so by arguing that, as the Frankfurt School theorists argued, capitalism has intensified and expanded to such an extent that its image/object commodities dominate all social relationships. Thirdly, in this chapter, I will outline Debord's revolutionary project and critically discuss Debord's idea of an all-encompassing spectacle, arguing that if the spectacle consumes everything and everyone, how is "class consciousness" and revolution supposed to occur?

In chapter four, I will analyze the Situationist International's position within the events of May 68. Firstly, I will show that the S. I. was marginalized in the media, continually described as a mysterious anarchist group that was controlling the various student movements. Secondly, I will argue that the S. I. provided the philosophical underpinning for May 68 with its practices, its theoretical ideas such as *détournement*, workers' councils, slogans, spontaneous/festive revolution and its actions within the occupation committee. As a result, the S. I. influenced debates on power, capitalism, everyday life and revolution in the sense that May 68 temporarily validated some of their principles and their notion that spontaneous/festive revolution could occur in highly developed industrial nations.

In chapter five, I will examine the S. I.'s actions following May 68, arguing that the movement disbanded because it exhausted itself trying to organize itself into a non-hierarchical organization. Furthermore it was succumbing to the logic of its own socio-economic critique, becoming a media commodity and an object of contemplation, that continued to be marginalized in the mass media. Nevertheless, the S. I.'s marginalization and commodification, which was occurring because of its rising popularity, influenced debates on capitalism in the sense that its own marginalization and commodification acknowledged capitalism's profound recuperative capabilities.

Finally, the conclusion will summarize the significance of the S. I. and its influences on popular culture and on the Anti-Globalization Movements, Terrorist Movements and the Green parties, arguing that each movement exhibits elements of the S. I. and some of its original militancy. However, due to the limited scope of this study, I will not delve too deeply in these

movements and their relationships to the Situationist International, instead I will only outline some broad trends within the S. I. that continue to influence subsequent alternative/sub-cultural and oppositional/counter-cultural movements.

Chapter 1

The Situationist International and previous Avant-Garde Movements

The history of the Situationist International begins with the observation that although the group eventually progressed theoretically into an all-encompassing critique of modern society, its initial ideas and practices were mostly contained to the realm of art. In its initial phase, from 1957 to approximately 1962, the Situationist International was a critical elaboration of previous avant-garde movements such as Dada (1919-1921), Surrealism (1924-1947), Cobra(1948-1951) and the Lettrist International (1952-1957). During this period, the S. I. 's objective was to use aesthetic practices in an attempt to unify art and everyday life in the hope of achieving a revolution of everyday life. In the process, the S. I.'s innovative practices and ideas transformed debates on art through the creation of situations, détournement and dérive.

However, before I begin my analysis it is important that I discuss certain general aspects of the avant-garde, outlined in Peter Burger's book, Theory of the Avant-Garde. This will enable a better understanding of what avant-garde movements attempted to achieve through art. Also, it is important that I show how avant-garde movements were to a certain extent inspired by the powerful philosophical critique of Marx and Nietzsche. Although I will not delve too deeply into Marx and Nietzsche's individual critiques and their relations to the avant-garde, it is nonetheless important to mention certain underlying assumptions that buttress the avant-garde and its practices.

According to Peter Burger, the primary attribute that characterizes an avant-garde

movement is an attempt to unify art and everyday life by abolishing art as an institution. The purpose of this is to transform everyday life. Burger observed that art during the 19th century underwent a transformation where its previous social purpose as a sacred object or representational object, became institutionalized and devoid of any social function. This coincided with the rise of modernism and the bourgeoisie. According to Burger,

Sacral Art (example: the art of the high Middle Ages) serve[d] as cult object. It [was] wholly integrated into the social institution 'religion'. It was produced collectively as a craft [and] the mode of reception [was]. . . collective. Courtly Art (example: the art at the Louis XIV) . . . [had] a precisely defined function. It [was] representational and serve[d] the glory of the prince and the self-portrayal of courtly society. Courtly art [was] part of the life praxis of courtly society, just as sacral art [was] part of the life praxis of the faithful.¹⁷

But, after the rise of modernism and the bourgeoisie, Burger argues that art underwent a change in which art separated itself from the praxis of life (i.e. everyday life) and became socially functionless: "in bourgeois art, the portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding occurs in a sphere that lies outside the praxis of life. . . the separation of art from the praxis of life [became] the decisive characteristic of the autonomy of bourgeois art"¹⁸. According to Burger, as art gradually retreated from everyday life, it became a separate sphere, an institution. Hence, Burger argues that the avant-garde aspires to reestablish art in everyday life and give it a social function again:

The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier art (a style) but art as an institution

¹⁷ Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 47.

¹⁸ Ibid. 48-49.

that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. . . . Rather, . . . avant-gardistes proposed the sublation of art . . . art [is] not to be simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life.¹⁹

For the avant-garde, when art and the praxis of life are united and art is once again practical, everyday life will be totally transformed. According to Burger, this is because art as an institution is a repository of values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity which are extruded from life and preserved in art.

All those needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life, because the principle of competition pervades all spheres, can find a home in art, because art is removed from the praxis of life. [However] in bourgeois society, art has a contradictory role: it projects the images of a better order and to that extent protests against the bad order that prevails. But, by realizing the image of a better order in fiction [art as an institution] relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make change. They are assigned to confinement in an ideal sphere.²⁰

In this respect, the avant-garde was an attempt to release the ideals and the energy of art stored within its institution in order that its attributes may permeate throughout everyday life and transform it. However, having described the avant-garde's basic principle, it is important to note that Burger states that the avant-garde movements ultimately failed in their attempts to revolutionize the praxis of life and because of this their aesthetics practices and their art were eventually recuperated back into the art institution. Nonetheless, as I will discuss later, the S. I. did eventually shift away from a focus on art after 1962, recognizing like Burger, that art could be

¹⁹ Ibid, 49.

²⁰ Ibid, 50.

easily recuperated. In fact, after 1962, the S. I. became more of a revolutionary organization dedicated to a political insurrection rather than the cultural insurrection that the avant-garde movements aspired to. I use Burger's analysis to the extent that it outlines the rise and the goals of the avant-garde which the Situationist International embraced in its early phase.

It is also important that I briefly mention that the philosophical critique of Marx and Nietzsche can be seen as supporting the avant-garde's goal for the transformation of everyday life. First, Marx's critique of capitalism supports the avant-garde by arguing that with the expansion of capitalism and competition the world is increasingly being divided into two distinct classes, the property owners and the workers. According to Marx, the workers are being oppressed by the property owners through rationalization, classification and increasing divisions of labor:

In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed. . . a class of laborers, who live only so long as they find work. . . These laborers. . . are commodity, like every other article of commerce, [they]. . . are exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market. Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labor, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and. . . all charm. . . Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved. . . the more modern industry becomes developed.²¹

By drawing on Marx's assumption, the avant-garde believes that through the unification of art and everyday life, art will restore the "charm" of the workman and instill his daily life with all the individual character that has been preserved within the art institution. The hope of the avant-garde

²¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto (London, England: Penguin Books, 1967) 87-88.

is that through the unification of art and everyday life a social transformation will ensue where rationalization, classification and divisions of labor will evaporate. From this perspective, the avant-garde through aesthetic practices is attempting to realize Marx's claim that "it is men who change circumstances. . . human activity can be . . . rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice"²².

Secondly, the avant-garde's goal is buttressed by Nietzsche's critique of modernity; more specifically, his argument that modernity's emphasis on strict reason is sinking humanity into deeper levels of decadence because it stifles human instincts. According to Nietzsche, this strict emphasis on rationality and the denial of the senses is creating deformed and self-deluded human beings.

The fanaticism. . . of rationality [is] to. . . be absurdly rational. . . Reason = virtue = happiness means merely: one must. . . counter the dark desires by producing a permanent daylight- the daylight of reason. One must be prudent, clear, bright at any cost: every yielding to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads downwards. . . It is necessary to go on to point out the error which lay in [the] faith in 'rationality at any cost'- It is self-deception. . . to imagine that by making war on [instincts]. . . therewith [we] elude [instincts] themselves. They [only] alter its expression, they do not abolish the thing itself. . . The entire morality of improvement, [modernity] included, has been a misunderstanding. . . To have to combat one's instincts- that is the formula for decadence: as long as life is ascending, happiness and instinct are one.²³

Nietzsche's argument that instincts are an important part of happiness is emphasized within the avant-garde in the sense that art, which has always been associated with human sensuality and the

²² Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," The Marx-Engels Reader ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978) 144.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London, England: Penguin Books, 1990) 43-44.

senses, is to be released from its prison (i.e. its institution) in order that it may transform and cure humanity. Similar to Nietzsche's statement that, "art is the great stimulus to life. . . art. . . brings to light much that is ugly, hard, questionable in life. . . [and] liberate[s]"²⁴, the avant-garde see art as liberating and capable of transforming human existence. By doing away with the institution of art, the avant-garde hopes to inundate everyday life with sensuality, thus achieving Nietzsche's notion that instincts are crucial to human happiness.

Having established what the avant-garde is and what its goals are, and having established important philosophical cruxes that are buttressing the avant-garde movements and their aesthetic practice, I now move to analysis of the early Situationist International and its relationship to other avant-garde movements. I have divided my analysis into four parts, each dealing with the S. I.'s relationship to previous avant-garde movements. In part one, I will discuss the S. I.'s relationship to the Surrealist movement. In part two, I will discuss the S. I.'s relationship to the Cobra movement. In part three, I will examine the S. I.'s relationship to the Lettrist International movement, and in part four, I will examine the S. I.'s relationship to the Dada movement. I have organized this chapter, not in the chronological order of the movements, but according to each movement's relationship to the Situationist International. For example, although Surrealism developed after Dada, I have chosen to begin with Surrealism because we can view the Situationist International as the reestablishment of Surrealism on a new foundation.

²⁴ Ibid, 93.

Surrealism and the Situationist International

Although Surrealism lasted from 1924 to approximately 1947 its membership fluctuated between one or two dozen members during its 23 years. Surrealism's dissolution after World War II prompted new art movements, new artistic experimentations and theories concerning the avant-garde. The S. I. was one of these post-war movements. The S. I. brought together many of the ideas that were present in Surrealism and causal to its dissolution. In many ways, the S. I.'s project was that of re-establishing Surrealism on a new foundation. Gone was Surrealism's emphasis "on the unconscious, quasi-mystical and occultist thinking, cult of irrationalism"²⁵ and re-emphasized were the ideas of cultural revolution and the revolution of everyday life.

For the S. I., Surrealism was deficient because it based itself on the unconscious. In a 1957 Report on the Construction of Situations, Guy Debord noted that the S. I.'s critique of Surrealism was that it was a movement whose foundation (the unconscious) was simplistic and bound to be recuperated back into the dominant capitalist hegemony's art institution:

The error that is at the root of Surrealism is the idea of the infinite richness of the unconscious imagination. The cause of Surrealism's ideological failure was its belief that the unconscious was the finally discovered ultimate force of life and the fact that the surrealists revised the history of ideas in accordance with that simplistic perspective, they never went any further. We now know that the unconscious imagination is poor that automatic writing is monotonous and that the whole ostentatious genre of would-be

²⁵ Elizabeth Sussman, On the Passage of a Few Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957-1972 (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1989) 22.

“strange” and “shocking” surrealist creations has ceased to be very surprising. . . the discovery of the role of the unconscious was indeed a surprise and an innovation; but it was not a law of future surprises and innovations. . . [Thus] it (the bourgeoisie) has been able to co-opt it(Surrealism) into aesthetic commerce.²⁶

For Debord, the fact that Surrealism was completely contained in the idea of the unconscious made it inevitable that it would eventually be recuperated back into the art institution. According to him, once the unconscious lost its “novelty” and its “shock” value, Surrealism lost its “revolutionary” edge and was recuperated. Although Debord’s statement concerning the unconscious is problematic, I only mention it in order to establish the S. I.’s position with respect to Surrealism. For instance, psychologists like Freud have articulated that the unconscious is timeless and an abyss incapable of being completely revealed. In his book, Meta-Psychology, Freud states that:

The nucleus of the Unconscious consists of instinctual representatives which seek to discharge their cathexis; that is to say, it consists of wishful impulses. . .[where] there are . . .no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty. . . The processes of the . . .Unconscious are timeless; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time. . .The Unconscious processes pay . . little regard to reality. . . in themselves they cannot be recognized. . . [this is] the abyss of the Unconscious.²⁷

Hence from Freud’s perspective, Surrealism was not wrong in basing itself on the notion that the unconscious is an exhaustible source of energy. However, it is more accurate to postulate that Guy Debord and the Situationist International are reacting against the aesthetic practices of

²⁶ Guy Debord, Report on the Construction of Situations (Paris: www.situationist.cjb.net, 1957) 2-3.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, Meta-Psychology, trans. James Strachey (London, England: Penguin Books, 1984)190-194.

Surrealism, rather than the validity of an unconscious. The S. I.'s critique is more or less directed at Surrealism's aesthetic practices in the sense that these practices had lost their novelty and their shock as means of revolutionizing life. This is due to the fact that people had adapted and gotten use to Surrealism's unconscious experimentations.

Despite criticizing Surrealism, the S. I. was indebted to Surrealism in the idea of the revolution of everyday life. However, instead of initiating the revolution of everyday life through the liberation of the unconscious as Surrealism had attempted to do, the S. I. sought to apply the idea directly to everyday social situations in an attempt to unify art and everyday life. One of their most innovative methods of application of this was the idea of "the construction of situations":

Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into superior passional quality. We must develop a systematic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviors which it gives rise to and which radically transform it.²⁸

In essence, the theory of the creative situation was a method by which to encourage individuals to play with their alienated environments in hopes of transforming them. This situation, the S. I. believed, would spark others to do the same and eventually culminate in the total transformation of everyday life. The result would be the creation of a state of life in which one's material world and behaviors are in "perpetual interaction" through the unification of art and the praxis of life.

An early example of a constructed situation by the S. I. was their initial model of the

²⁸ Guy Debord, Report on the Construction of Situations (Paris: www.situationist.cjb.net, 1957) 7.

household party which they believed was straightforward, playful and capable to being comprehended by anyone who had ever enjoyed a late night out. The ambience of this constructed situation, was born from soft lighting, music and alcohol. According to Debord, if a party was constructed properly, it could stimulate feelings of camaraderie, freedom and enjoyment within its participants. As an experiment, Guy Debord and some of the Situationist members ran a cafe in 1958 for a short period on the Rue Descartes called La Méthode. The cafe centered around projecting the ambience of a party in hopes of stimulating these types of feelings in customers.²⁹ Other examples of constructed situations that the S. I. created include films which were designed to incite confusion in the audience, interactive art exhibits requiring audience participation to complete the art work, and constructed images designed to awaken people out of their passivity, by displaying contradictions in the capitalist system (more will said on this later).

With the creation of these fluid and immaterial situations, the Situationist International could avoid the danger of being recuperated back into the dominant hegemony and its art institution. These aesthetic practices will be discussed further into this chapter; I mention it here to establish that the S. I. attempted to unify art and everyday life through this practice of constructing situations.

I will now examine the link between Surrealism and the S. I., and the revolution of everyday life. When did this notion first appear in the avant-garde movements? What is this idea comprised of? What are its components? First and foremost, according to Henri Lefebvre

²⁹ Simon Sadler, The Situationist City (London, England: The M.I.T. Press, 1998) 106-107.

everyday life is defined as “whatever remains after one has eliminated all specialized activities”³⁰.

Hence, for Lefebvre everyday life comprises the many banal activities that an individual’s partakes in on a daily basis away from work. These trivial activities can consist of such things as eating, drinking, reading, communicating with others, mowing the lawn, doing laundry etc. In general, all his or her inconsequential sociological and psychological daily activities.

The idea of the revolution of everyday life first appeared with Surrealism’s leading thinker, André Breton. In his book entitled Les Pas Perdus, published in 1922 just prior to Surrealism’s official inception in 1924, the revolution of everyday life is conceived as an attempt to transform the banality and categorization of everyday life into an exciting and liberating unitary ambience where individuals are one with history and are free to self-actualize without any economic interferences. Although the revolution of everyday life was never explicitly stated by Breton, there is a strong sense of it here.

Tant qu’on fera réciter des prières dans les écoles sous formes d’explications de textes et de promenades dans les musées, nous crierons au despotisme. . . . J’entends bien que l’abus. . . est. . . à encourager tout ce qui peut jeter un doute sur la raison. L’idée de la contradiction, qui demeure à l’ordre du jour, m’apparaît comme un non-sens. . . le terme initial et ainsi de suite jusqu’à ce que l’esprit parvienne à l’idée absolue, conciliation de toutes les oppositions et unité de toutes les catégories. . . . La vie humaine ne serait pas cette déception pour certain si nous ne nous sentions constamment en puissance d’accomplir des actes au dessus de nos forces. . . . Nous [sommes] partisans de toute révolution [pour] l’amélioration [du] sociale.³¹

³⁰ Guy Debord, “Perspectives for the Conscious Changes on Everyday Life,” Internationale Situationist#6 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1961) 1.

³¹ André Breton, Les Pas Perdus (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) 68,69,70,76, 109.

In this excerpt Breton sees life as deceitful in the sense that society's founding principle, "reason", creates an increasing fragmentation in people's individual lives. He states that society's celebration of reason is nonsense. This is a direct link to Nietzsche's philosophical critique of modernity. Breton also encourages activities that cast doubt on rationality and that try to revolutionize human life into a unitary form, namely to reconstitute all the oppositions and categories in the world into a cohesive whole where individuals are empowered rather than constantly subjugated by the dominant capitalist hegemony. In many ways Surrealism tried to do precisely this with its unconscious experimentations and artistic activities.

However, although the Situationist International picked up the idea from Surrealism, contrary to Surrealism the Situationist International did not want to promote irrationality as the path to total transformation. Instead, the S. I. wanted to promote rationality. It saw the revolution of everyday life occurring because people would logically comprehend their situations in modern society as irrational and its effects as being the propagation of irrationality. In a statement praising Surrealism, Debord states that "the very success of Surrealism has a lot to do with the fact that the most modern side of society's ideology has renounced strict hierarchy of factitious values and openly uses the irrational, including the vestiges of Surrealism to sustain itself"³². Thus inverse to Surrealism's admiration of the unconscious and "the completely irrational alienation of primitive societies . . . We (the Situationists) need to go forward, not backward. We need to make the world more rational-the necessary first step in making it more exciting, fascinating and

³² Guy Debord, Report on the Construction of Situations (Paris: [www. situationist.cjb.net](http://www.situationist.cjb.net), 1957) 3.

fulfilling”³³. Consequently, the S. I. established its foundation on Surrealism’s idea of the revolution of everyday life, while doing away with the idea of the unconscious. Hence, the S. I. elaborated on Surrealism by making the idea for a revolution of everyday life its core principle. This elaboration of Surrealism allowed the S. I. to fully direct its critique and its artistic practices on breaking the boundaries separating art and everyday life in order to transform everyday life.

Cobra and the Situationist International

The Cobra movement was founded in November 1948 and officially lasted until November 1951, although many of its members still collaborated on projects and remained artistically close to each other after the group disbanded. The name “Cobra” is made up of the first letters of the cities where its members lived and worked: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. The artists of Cobra rejected rational Western culture, due to the fact that they believed it had been the primary cause of the Second-World-War. The rejection of rationality was incorporated into the group’s artistic vision and linked it with Surrealism’s irrational imagery. Wishing to reach the very source of human creativity in an effort to emancipate society from rationalization and alienation, they were inspired by art forms, such as children’s art, Cubism, Eastern calligraphy and prehistoric art, which they believed were unencumbered by traditional Western rules of aesthetics.³⁴

According to Cobra, children were unencumbered by modern aesthetic traditions and

³³ Ibid. 3.

³⁴ Willemijn Stokvis, *Cobra* (New York: Rizzoli Press, 1987) 7-8.

[image 1]

45 Masacre 1931
(Massacre)
Oil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 63 in. (120 x 160 cm)
Galerie Louise Leirs, Paris

[image 2]

rationality. Consequently, the movement's appreciation of childlike artistic expressions was seen as a way to break with the formalism of the dominant hegemony. The group also was fascinated with the powerful expression of irrational shapes and colors that playfulness could bring about in art. Cobra had an anti-aesthetic and anti-specialization view of art. Painters wrote poetry and poets painted. As a group, Cobra established contacts with film-makers and sculptors, took photographs, made works of art from rubbish, worked together on murals, canvases and paper. Cobra was a reaction to Surrealism with an increased emphasis on the spontaneous application of paint.³⁵ An example of this is a painting by Cobra painter, Karel Appel entitled "Human Landscape" [image 1] and a painting by the prominent Surrealist painter, André Masson entitled, "Massacre" [image 2]. First, the paintings are similar in the sense that both used similar color and similar themes as each painter tried to capture their inner subjectivity. However, although Appel's painting alludes to an attempt to paint the inner self, his artwork is messy compared to Masson's, whose application of paint appears much more calculated and more attuned to academic art. Secondly, Appel's paint appears to be applied with more intensity than Masson, which shows his disregard for cleanliness and traditional aesthetic beauty. Although, the two artists both use variations of automatist painting, (i.e. the spontaneous wandering of the hand or paint brush on a surface), Appel has expanded on Masson's earlier technique by speeding up the process in order to maximize spontaneity and playfulness, the effect of which is a less calculated style of painting more oriented to the artist's personal vision than traditional aesthetic rules.

³⁵ Ibid, 10.

This radicalness in Cobra was initially praised by the Situationist International. Debord himself commented in 1957 that “the merit of [this] group was to have understood that such organization is necessitated by the complexity and extent of present-day problems”³⁶. In fact, some members of the Cobra movement, Asger Jorn and Constant A. Nieuwenhuis, would later participate in the S. I. movement. Nevertheless, despite praising the movement and welcoming Cobra members within its ranks, the S. I. was just as rigorous in its critique of Cobra as it was with Surrealism. In 1957 Guy Debord stated that,

Their lack of ideological rigor, the limitation of their pursuits to mainly plastic experimentation, and above all the absence of a comprehensive theory of conditions and perspectives of their experience led to their breakup.³⁷

He stated that Cobra was not well theorized as an avant-garde movement to have a serious effect on modern society. It was too loose as a movement and too set on traditional art practices in its efforts to transform everyday life, and thus like earlier Surrealist art it was easily recuperated back into modern society and the art system.

Nonetheless, the S. I. did adopt many of the ideas that were present within Cobra, including its observations on architecture. For example in a 1954 article entitled “Architecture for Life”, Asger Jorn articulated the importance of architecture as the highest point in artistic evolution because of the fact that architecture has the ability to alter human emotion and human

³⁶ Guy Debord, Report on the Construction of Situations (Paris: www.situationist.cjb.net, 1957) 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 5.

existence itself.

Architecture is always the ultimate achievement of intellectual and artistic evolution, the materialization of an economic stage. Architecture is the final point on the achievement of any artistic endeavor because the creation of architecture implies the construction of an environment and the establishment of a way of life.³⁸

This central point would be elaborated upon by the S. I. in the sense that it would understand architecture as crucial to the context of the revolution of everyday life. The transformation of everyday life would have to have a component that revolved around architecture. To deal with this, the S. I. developed a concept called “unitary urbanism” which was first introduced by the Lettrist International. Unitary urbanism was an expansion of Cobra’s ideas in the sense that the concept was a theoretical attempt to apply new techniques to architecture in an effort to establish a new way of life. The S. I. defined unitary urbanism as:

The use of all arts and techniques as means contributing to the composition of a unified milieu. Such an interrelated ensemble must be envisaged as incomparably more far-reaching than the old domination of architecture. . . the most elementary unit of unitary urbanism is not the house, but the architectural complex, which combines all the factors conditioning an ambiance, or series of clashing ambiances . . . a theory of “state-of-mind” quarters, according to which each quarter of a city would be designed to provoke a specific basic sentiment to which people would knowingly expose themselves. It seems that such a project draws appropriate conclusions from the tendency to depreciate randomly encountered primary sentiments, and that its realization could contribute to accelerating that depreciation.³⁹

As we can see, the original idea put forward by Jorn regarding the importance of architecture in

³⁸ Asger Lorn, “Architecture for Life,” Potlash#15 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1954) 1.

³⁹ Guy Debord, Report on the Construction of Situations (Paris: www.situationist.cjb.net, 1957) 7.

establishing a new way of life is present within the S. I.'s more refined notion of unitary urbanism, emphasizing the importance of architecture as a medium that has a powerful influence on human existence. Expanding on Cobra, the S. I. developed a model in which a city would be divided and subdivided with the idea that each section would be designed to instill and encourage certain emotions in individuals frequenting those spaces. Although the S. I. never really implemented its unitary urbanist model in everyday life, it nonetheless left an extensive portfolio of unfinished unitary works along with various artistic exhibitions that portrayed small models of what unitary urbanism might look like (see Chapter 2).

The S. I. also adopted Jorn's critique of functionalist architecture. Functionalist architecture or functionalism is the belief that a thing or a building's function determines its design. Jorn's criticism starts with the notion that utility and function are the beginning points for any formal criticism. With functionalist architecture, it is a matter of redefining this original mandate on a new platform:

Utility and function will always be the starting point for any formal criticism; it is simply a question of transforming functionalism's program. . . . Functionalists ignore the psychological function of surroundings. . . . The appearances of the buildings and the objects that we use that form our environment have a function that is separate from their practical use. . . . Functionalist Rationalists believed that it was possible to attain ideals, definitive forms of the different objects useful to people. Developments to date have shown that this static conception was mistaken. We must arrive at a dynamic conception of forms, we must face the fact that all human forms are in a constant state of transformation. . . . The radicalism of forms [or functionalism] is a result of the fact that people are saddened when they do not find some unexpected element in the known.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Asger Jorn, "Architecture for Life," Potlash#15 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1954) 1.

Jorn states that functionalism is radical because it is purely based on function. It does not leave or add other elements which inspire emotional responses in people, such as one might find in gothic architecture which has many “unexpected elements”. Jorn’s primary criticism is that functionalism does not take into account the psychological impact of architecture on people. By restricting itself to pure utility and function, it impoverishes the human need to discover “unfamiliar phenomenon”⁴¹.

On the other hand, the S. I. picked up the notion of dynamic spaces and devised a plan that would address many of the criticisms that Jorn made of functionalism, by creating situations and spaces that inspire and encourage harmony in individuals. According to the S. I., these spaces should first and foremost be designed with the psychological effect in mind:

[Architecture] will tend toward a specific harmony distinct from neighboring harmonies; or else will play on a maximum breaking up of internal harmony. . . . Unitary Urbanism is dynamic, in that it is directly related to styles of behavior. . . . this new architecture will primarily be based not on free, poetic lines and forms- in the sense that today’s “lyrical abstract” painting uses those terms- but rather on the atmospheric effects of rooms, hallways, streets-atmospheres linked to the gestures they contain. Architecture must advance by taking emotionally moving situations, rather than emotionally moving forms, as the material it works with. And the experiments conducted with this material will lead to new, as yet unknown forms.⁴²

The S. I. elaborates on Jorn’s critique by directly formulating a plan for the implementation of new urban spaces within everyday life, designed to bolster certain distinct sentiments in people.

The S. I. has developed practical methods to implement their aesthetic ideas within everyday life

⁴¹ Ibid, 1.

⁴² Guy Debord, Report on the Construction of Situations (Paris: www.situationist.cjb.net, 1957) 7.

through constructed situations.

Although the Situationist International's emphasis on the revolution of everyday life is primarily drawn from Surrealism, whose literature first expressed such a notion, there is also a link between the S. I. and Cobra. For example in 1949 Constant A. Nieuwenhuis commented in a Cobra article entitled "Our Own Desires Build the Revolution", that society must be revolutionized because desire and human relationships had become stagnant in a passive world:

What is the reason for this need to break the bonds which have kept us within the social system for hundreds of years. . . Is our culture incapable of prolonging itself and of leading us one day to the satisfaction of our desires? . . . In fact, this culture has never been capable of satisfying anyone, neither slave, nor a master who has every reason to believe himself happy in luxury. . . For all we know of the realm of desires is that it continuously reverts to one immeasurable desire for freedom. As a basic task we propose liberation of social life, which will open the way to the new world—a world where all the cultural aspects and inner relationships of our ordinary lives will take on new meaning. . . It is impossible to know a desire other than by satisfying it, and the satisfaction of our basic desire is revolution. . . Revolution alone will enable us to make our desires, even those of 1949.⁴³

Nieuwenhuis' excerpt links Cobra with Surrealism and the Situationist International. In this excerpt, he expresses many of the radical sentiments that the S. I. echoed ten years later. The transformation of social life was the cornerstone of the S. I. and was one of the founding points of Surrealism. Although Cobra would go about its revolution differently than the S. I., staying closer to Surrealism and traditional art forms, we can see how Nieuwenhuis' statement puts Cobra in the avant-garde discourse of the late nineteen-forties and late fifties. In fact Nieuwenhuis' himself

⁴³ Constant A. Nieuwenhuis, "Our Own Desires Build the Revolution," Cobra#4 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1949) 1.

[image 3]

[image 3]

Architects' house at Bregnerød, Carl-Henning Pedersen's mural. The door was decorated by Jørn's son Klaus, aged seven. Painting subsequently removed.

Asger Jørn's mural facing that of Carl-Henning Pedersen. Painting now removed. Photos Kunsthistorik Piadearkiv.

would eventually become a member of the S. I., participating in its constructed situations which embodied and expanded on Cobra techniques.

One of the most important techniques that was incorporated by the S. I. from Cobra was wall or mural painting. Although undergoing a small mutation with the S. I., wall painting or graffiti as it is now commonly known became an important part of its practices and was one of the elements that protestors used in the May 1968 uprisings to rally support and express ideas (see Chapter 4). Wall painting first appeared in Cobra in 1949 when a group of Cobra members painted the interior of a house owned by a trout farmer and potter named Erik Nyholm. The house was located in Funder, Silkeborg Denmark [image 3]. The murals are a celebration of cave drawings, and are intended to question the traditional notion of authorship in art and the notion of the canvas as a painting surface. These collective works problematize the hegemonic notion that there should only be one creator to a work of art in order to facilitate the identification and price of a work as it travels throughout the art market. Through collective endeavors such as these, Cobra broke with the idea of the solitary artist removed from society. With mural painting, artists begin to bridge the gap between art and everyday life which the avant-garde movements had attempted to do since Dada.

By painting on an immobile surface like a wall, Cobra went against the conventional practice of canvas painting which facilitates the commercial aspects of a work of art. Moreover, Cobra painted the murals without charging a commission, in an attempt to negate the idea of the commercial artist. Because they refused payment and negated the art work's mobility which is absolutely crucial to the art system, this particular artistic technique made it very difficult for this

art to be recuperated by the dominant hegemony and its art institution. This negation of recuperation would be an important aspect of the S. I.'s techniques.

The S. I. expanded on wall painting in two ways, first by negating mural images and turning them into quick precise statements; and second, by taking the idea of indoor wall painting and shifting it outdoors into the social arena of everyday life. With graffiti, the S. I. bridged the gap between art and everyday life. They began writing on city walls, making their art literal with catch phrases that could strike a mass audience of daily pedestrians moving about the city. In this format, the S. I.'s graffiti allowed for a quicker connection between viewer and the art. This served to negate the crucial aspect of contemplation in institutional art. In the space of a second a viewer could read the sign or the message and process the information without stopping his or her course of direction. As a result, the S. I.'s graffiti was able to have a direct effect on everyday life, while acknowledging a conceptual similarity to Cobra's wall painting.

Examples of these graffiti inscriptions are the ones that appeared during the May 68 uprisings which inspired Bernard E. Brown to write in his book Protest in Paris that "the slogans . . . of the [S. I.] were considered expressions of mass spontaneity and individual ingenuity"⁴⁴.

Slogans include:

Revolution ceases to be the moment it becomes necessary to be sacrificed for it-- It is forbidden to forbid--Neither gods nor masters--Down with the abstract, long live the ephemeral--After art, god is dead--Down with a world where the guarantee that we won't die of starvation has been purchased with the guarantee that we will die of boredom--Club

⁴⁴ Bernard E. Brown, "Protest in Paris." Lipstick Traces, Greil Marcus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 31.

Med, a cheap holiday in other people's misery—Don't change employers, change the employment of life—Never Work—Chance must be systematically explored—Run, comrade, the old world is behind you—Be cruel—The more you consume the less you live— Live without dead time—Indulge untrammelled desire— people who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and positive about the refusal of constraints, have corpses in their mouths— Under the paving stones, the beach!.⁴⁵

Despite the fact that some of these slogans were first conceived by the Lettrist International (which I will discuss next), it was with the S. I. that they were put to full use in everyday life through graffiti and its journals. With the S. I., graffiti was seen as belonging directly to everyday life. It united art with everyday life. Its expression was directly within everyday life, both conceptually as commenting on it and physically by being written on public walls. For the S. I., graffiti negated the dominant hegemony's recuperation because the practice and the statements were oppositional and subversive towards the dominant hegemony's aesthetic ideas.

Although critical of Cobra, the Situationist International did appropriate some of its members, some of its ideas (i.e. its critique of architecture), and some of its techniques (i.e. wall painting) in the quest to revolutionize everyday life. The S. I. expanded on these ideas and techniques in order to break the barriers between art and everyday life and encourage social transformation.

The Lettrist International and the Situationist International

⁴⁵Ibid. 31-32.

Although very influenced by the Lettrist International (L. I.) in its ideas of the dissolution of social hierarchy, “détournement”, “dérive”, “critique of architecture” and “the creation of situations”, the Situationist International criticized the L. I. as being in a state of inertia. The Situationist International argued that since the Lettrist International “damned all those who believed in ‘leaving traces’”⁴⁶, it imprisoned itself not to leave any traces for itself or to attain any kind of notoriety. Its philosophy and project was to “do nothing and yet maintain itself”⁴⁷. This precarious position, argued the S. I., was a major contradiction in the L. I.’s vision, to change the world and yet do nothing that might leave a mark.

Nonetheless, the L. I. did leave some traces in its five-year history. Founded in 1952 and lasting until 1957, the Lettrist International was a movement of young people, roughly around a dozen, who were formerly poets, students, film makers, runaways and drunks all living in Paris under a similar vision that “the art of the future will be the overthrow of situations, or nothing”⁴⁸. In its five years the movement left less than three dozen newsletters, a few fugitive essays, various experiments in détournement, some telephone-pole stickers and one slogan “Never Work” scratched on a wall. As a movement made up of youths, averaging around twenty-one years of age, the L. I. promised a world of technological mastery, household conveniences and leisure machines or what it called the “defused bombs” and “blunted knives” of Dada and Surrealism. In private, the L. I. revisited many of the old Surrealist and Dada practices such as the cutting out of phrases and images to take them out of their context and the tossing of puzzle pieces on a table to

⁴⁶ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 352.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 352.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 163.

find what references they could. Reminiscent of Surrealism, it did seances in which mock conversations would take place between participants and ghosts. The L. I. also made low budget films such as Guy Debord's 1952 film, Howling in favor of Sade, which was designed to encourage a negative reaction of its audience. But, first and foremost, the L. I. wanted the end of institutional art and the end of work. However, caught in the contradiction of its chosen inertia, it was paralyzed in its theoretical stance and forced to remain completely anonymous. As a result, if its ideas were to succeed, it needed to reconstitute its vision.⁴⁹

The Situationist International was the restoration of L. I.'s practices within a new visionary frame. The S. I., contrary to the Lettrist International, tried to publicize its critique of capitalist society, while making an effort for its authors to remain anonymous. Nevertheless, the S. I. embodied the raw angst of the L. I. within its refined critique of society:

Because the S. I. worked to make its critique public while ensuring that its authors remained obscure-because its members. . . found a tone that let them speak as tribunes of an invisible empire-the group became mythical. . . But no matter how sophisticated or voracious the S. I.'s critique became . . . whenever the critique was taken off the table and put into play, it almost automatically devolved back into the primitivism of the Lettrist International. . . "Oblivion is our ruling passion." . . [This call] was the L.I.'s gold.⁵⁰

In this sense, one can see the L. I.'s call of oblivion and *détournement* as the core of the S. I.'s aesthetic ideology. The Situationist International modified the Lettrist International's idea of complete anonymity by having a core of anonymous authors, whose writing would be promoted

⁴⁹ Ibid. 18, 321, 358, 359.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 353-357.

only as a collective, the Situationist International. In this way they were able to stay true to the Lettrist ideal, while transcending it in the fact that no one member would leave a trace, but as a part of a movement.

The Situationist International appropriated many Lettrist practices such as “détournement”, “dérive”, “graffiti”, “the creation of situations”, its “critique of architecture”, and “psychogeography”. Détournement, a very crucial practice in the S. I., was originally conceived by the Lettrist International. The practice was defined by Guy Debord, in an article entitled “Détournement as Negation and Prelude”, as the theft of a cultural artifact from its original context for the purpose of inversely recontextualizing it:

Détournement, the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble. . . . The two fundamental laws of détournement are the loss of importance of each détourned element--which may go so far as to completely lose its original sense--and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect. Détournement has a peculiar power which obviously stems from the double meaning, from the enrichment of most of the terms by the coexistence within them of their old and new senses. Détournement is practical because it is so easy to use and because of its inexhaustible potential for reuse.⁵¹

What détournement offered was the ability to subvert traditional artistic production, to devalue art and reinvest it in a new kind of communication. The technique could not mystify as traditional hegemonic art had previously done because its very form was a demystification of the object or phrase. By taking it out of its original context, namely its mystifying space, new meaning could be

⁵¹ Guy Debord, “Détournement as Negation and Prelude,” Internationale Situationiste#3 (www.situationist.cbj.net, 1959) 1.

[image 4]

HURLEMENTS EN FAVEUR DE

le public se sentait atteint dans sa dignité et criait au fou.

on entendait les cris aigus des bonnes femmes et les injures des hommes. Les salauds, orfèvres, fumeurs, assassins, bouchers, résonnaient.

CINE-CLUB : Vous assistez à la projection du premier film anti-

Les arts futurs seront des bouleversements de situations, ou rien.

[image 5]

Roles reserved for the Negro in the spectacle. II. Bad Negro, in Nebraska, 1919.

attached to it subversively.

For example in [image 4], done in the late fifties by Guy Debord for his collage book, Mémoire, we see pieces of newspaper cut out and reapplied to a sheet of paper with the paint drops of Asger Jorn. Here we see the technique of *détournement*; at first glance, the piece looks chaotic and incoherent but on further inspection there is a definite theme to the collage which is meant to comment on Guy Debord's first film, Howling in Favor of Sade. Comments such as "this is the first botched film" and "the art of the future will be the creation of situations or nothing" alluded to the effects that this film had on its audience which, according to Situationist Michèle Bernstein, often led to cries of discontent; "le public criait au fou"⁵². The L. I.'s *détourned* object was the starting point for the Situationist International.

However, instead of commenting on its own films, the S. I. would push the practice to extremes, politically commenting on everyday life. An example of this radicalization is the *détourned* image of an African American man burning to death. This gruesome image [image 5] first appeared in 1964, in one of the S. I.'s journals. Cut out from a Nebraska newspaper published in 1919, the image of a crowd of white men watching a burning black man is inverted by the S. I. with a simple caption reading; "Role reserved for the Negro in the Spectacle". With this image we see the initial ideas of the Lettrist International on *détournement*, the removal of an object from its original context and reapplied to convey an alternate meaning, elaborated upon by the Situationist International. The S. I. has elaborated on *détournement* by taking emotionally

⁵² Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 278.

disturbing objects or images and redirecting them at the social system. With the S. I., détournement has a political purpose. It is united with everyday life serving as a method for social commentary. In this case, the S. I. attacks a racist social system which it insinuates has no space for individuals of different cultural backgrounds. In Debord's words, détournement "reinvests . . . the elements of the cultural past"⁵³ with new meaning.

Another practice of the L. I. that persisted into the Situationist International and was a crucial element of the movement is the "creation of situations". This idea first appears early on in the Lettrist International with one of its famous situational creations, Debord's 1952 film, Howling in Favor of Sade. The film was purposely designed to encourage a situation in which an audience would begin to shout and howl at the picture screen, thus actualizing the title of the film. Michèle Bernstein, a Lettrist and later a Situationist member, remarked thirty-one years after the first screening of the film on the event:

I was there-up in the balcony with Guy, with the bags of flour. . . below us were all these people that we knew. . . The flour was of course to drop on the people below. And in those days I had a voice-a voice that could break glass. I don't know where it went- if it's smoking or drinking. It wasn't a scream: just a sound I could make. I was to 'howl' when people began to make noise, when they began to complain-I was to make a greater noise. And I did. I can't remember if Guy and I even stayed to the finish- you know the last twenty minutes are silence, nothing.⁵⁴

The blank screen in the last twenty minutes was to insinuate that art was a scam and that any real movie one might pay to see was full of nothing but the dominant hegemony's propaganda. This

⁵³ Guy Debord, "Détournement as Negation and Prelude," Internationale Situationiste#3 (www.situationist.cbj.net, 1959) 1.

⁵⁴ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 337.

was an “anti-show” designed to awaken the audience out of its passivity, to have it participate in the film by encouraging a negative response from it. This is what the film did, although to experience the film first-hand might have been very boring with its barrage of disconnected images, dialogue that was deliberately done in monotone and a film format that was designed for a black screen when the soundtrack was silent and a white screen when there was dialogue. This would have been confusing to an audience accustomed to classic narrative cinema. Nonetheless, the film did achieve its objective as art historian Guy Atkins remarked at a 1960 Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) screening:

When the lights went up there was an immediate babble of protest. People stood around and some made angry speeches. One man threatened to resign from the ICA unless the money for his ticket was refunded. . . . The noise from the lecture room was so loud that it reached the next audience, queueing on the stairs for the second house. Those who had just seen the film came out of the auditorium and tried to persuade their friends on the stairs to go home, instead of wasting their time and money. But the atmosphere was so charged with excitement that this well-intentioned advice had the opposite effect. . . . Afterwards one realized that Debord’s use of emptiness and silence had played on the nerves of the spectators, finally causing them to let out ‘howls in favor of de Sade’.⁵⁵

Taking a cue from the Lettrist International’s constructed situation, the Situationist International sought to apply the same formula outside the cinema into everyday life. If all one had to do to encourage certain emotions was to lead an audience to expect one thing and give it something else, then the same logic could be applied to everyday life. One could study the expectations of people in the public sphere in order to create an unexpected situation within everyday life. In

⁵⁵ Ibid, 332.

essence, this meant to critically study the geography of public spaces, since different public spaces encourage different expectations or different psychological effects on the individuals frequenting those spaces. Again, resorting to Lettrist practices, the Situationist International set out to map the common effects that different urban spaces stimulate in individuals.

One of these practices that the S. I. borrowed from the L. I. was “dérive”. Dérive was a method of analyzing the various effects of different urban spaces on the psyche of an individual by rapidly moving through their different ambiances. In an article titled, “Theory of the Dérive”, Guy Debord describes the practice as:

a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérive involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notion of journey or stroll. . . from a dérive point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.⁵⁶

The process of dérive was to discover the effects of one’s environment on the human psyche. The actual technique was dérive, while the findings or effects where labeled under the larger category of “psychogeography”, meaning the effects of geographical spaces on the human psyche. The investigations were meant to provide a detailed analysis of urban space. Members of the S. I. were to drift down city streets and catalogue what repulsed and attracted them. Hence, from this perspective, the S. I. had moved the textual analysis of avant-garde paintings into the broader spectrum of everyday life, where the city was understood and studied as a text that exerts

⁵⁶ Guy Debord, “Theory of Dérive,” Internationale Situationiste#2 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1958) 1-3.

powerful influences on human behavior through architectural designs. Of course the idea of the city as a text is not new. People had studied architecture and the city long before the S. I. came along. However, what made the S. I. different is that it attempted to analyze the emotional effects that different sectors and architectures of the city have on individuals in order to encourage the transformation of everyday life and the subversion of the dominant hegemony. As a result, the S. I. catalogued what repulsed, attracted and excited their senses about the city of Paris, etc. The S. I. attempted to analyze supposedly subjective experiences in order to find objective effects that certain geographical spaces have on individual behavior and emotions. Nonetheless, this was all done by the S. I. in order to encourage the revolution of everyday life.

Everyday, members of the S. I. walked the streets studying advertising, art, news, and structures etc. They took things from their environments such as pieces of text and discarded objects to use in their counter-language of *détournement*. Debord stated during this time period the S. I. was playing “a game of freedom. . . a systematic questioning. . . of all the diversions and works of society, a total critique of its idea of happiness. . . the S. I. [was] . . . the masters and possessors of their own lives”⁵⁷. The Situationist International argued that within capitalism’s new stage of development after the Second-World-War individuals were confronted “with the reality [that] capitalism and technology. . . render[ed] [them] . . . powerless, except if he [or she] is a thief or a terrorist”⁵⁸. The S. I. practiced “intellectual terrorism”⁵⁹, commonly called plagiarism. Closely related to this, the S. I. also stole intellectual property in order to reconfigure

⁵⁷ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 173-174.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 178.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 178.

it into its opposite meaning (see image 5).

The Situationist expanded on the L. I. with a more refined theory of “psychogeography” that embodied the practice of *dérive*. The Situationist International looked for exact laws in urban spaces, specific effects of those spaces and more concrete rules for its eventual intervention within urbanism. Debord described this as:

The study of the exact laws and specific effects of geographical environments, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals, thus takes on a double meaning: active observation of present-day urban agglomeration and development of hypotheses on the structure of a situationist city. The progress of psychogeography depends to a great extent on the statistical extension of its methods of observation, but above all on the experimentation by means of concrete interventions in urbanism.⁶⁰

Different from the L. I., the Situationist International was explicit in its quest to intervene in everyday life. The S. I. expanded on the L. I. in the sense that it was direct in its goals, while the L. I., although avid on changing the world, was more of a secret movement known only to a select circle. Nonetheless the group was quite influential on the S. I.’s ideas. In fact many of the members of the L. I. became part of the Situationist International, most prominent were Michèle Bernstein, Guy Debord and Ivan Chtcheglov.

Another important aspect that was taken up by the S. I. was the Lettrist International’s critique of architecture. In fact, it was through their individual critiques of architecture that Cobra and the Lettrist International eventually united into the Situationist International. It was through their mutual beliefs in both the revolution of everyday life and their critique of architecture that

⁶⁰ Guy Debord, Report on the Construction of Situations (Paris: www.situationist.cjb.net, 1957) 7.

the S. I. was initially formed. Although influenced by the L. I.'s critique, the S. I. also expanded on it. For example, in one of its critical pamphlets, the Lettrist International argued that the prison was becoming the model for city planners which only promoted repression and passivity in the masses.

In these days where everything, every aspect of life, is becoming more and more repressive. . . he builds individual living cells. . . he builds vertical ghettos. . . [With] Le Corbusier. . . the prison is becoming the preferred housing type. . . [he] is trying to do away with streets. . . [and] divided life into closed, isolated units, into societies under perpetual surveillance; no more opportunities for uprisings or meaningful encounters. . . disorientation on a daily basis. . . It is nothing more than regression en masse.⁶¹

This critique of modern architecture was also one that continued into the Situationist International. In Ivan Chtcheglov's 1958 article, "Formulary for a New Urbanism", he recognizes the disorientation that a city has on an individual and the sense of boredom that it instills in them. He expands on the L. I.'s critiques by offering an alternative view of what a city can be:

We are bored in the city, there is no longer any Temple of the Sun. . . All cities are geological. You can't take three steps without encountering ghosts. . . We move within closed [cities] whose landmarks constantly draw us towards the past. . . certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. . . We don't intend to prolong the mechanistic civilizations and frigid architecture that ultimately lead to boring leisure. . . A mental disease has swept the planet: banalization. Everyone is hypnotized by production and conveniences-sewage systems, elevators, bathrooms, washing machines. This state of affairs, arising out of a struggle against poverty, has overshot its ultimate goal—the liberation of humanity from material cares— and becomes an omnipresent obsessive image. . . the construction of situations [is] one of the fundamental desires on which the next civilization will be

⁶¹ Guy Debord and Michèle Bernstein, "Skyscraper by the roots," Potlash#5 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1954) 1-2.

founded. . . total creation . . . the need to *play* with architecture.⁶²

The need for play would comprise many of the aspects of Situationist International.

Détournement is an example of this, taking a phrase and playing with it, rejuvenating its initial meaning by applying to it a new context. What the Situationist International wanted to accomplish with architecture was to re-energize it in the sense that buildings would not be alienating places where function dictated the behavior of people. The S. I. proposed architectures and urban spaces that increased people's sense of play through the "discovery of mysteries. . . modulating reality and engendered dreams"⁶³. However as time passed the S. I. critique of urbanism became increasingly radical as it began to understand that the state of urbanism and the reluctance of the government to deal with such issues was overwhelming. In 1961 Debord stated that;

Henceforth the crisis of urbanism is all the more concretely a social and political one, even though today no force born of traditional politics is any longer capable of dealing with it/ Medico-sociological banalities on the "pathology of housing projects," the emotional isolation of people who must live in them, or the development of certain extreme reactions of denial. . . of its fundamental principle of alienation and constraint. . . a Paris exhibition of urbanism entitled "Tomorrow Paris" offered in reality a defense of large housing complexes, those already built or planned for the far outskirts of the city. The future of Paris would lie outside of Paris. The first part of this didactic presentation sought to convince the public (mainly working people) that decisive statistics had shown Paris to be more unhealthy and unlivable than any other known capital.⁶⁴

⁶² Ivan Chitchevlov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," Internationale Situationist#1 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1958) 1-2.

⁶³ Ibid, 2.

⁶⁴ Guy Debord, "Critique of Urbanism," Internationale Situationiste#6 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1961) 2.

Debord, in this statement, understands that the conditions of life are primarily linked to the socio-economic conditions of life which he believes are increasingly getting out of control even for politicians. He argues that the political sphere has resorted to denying these issues, offering excuses for this type of urban planning with exhibitions of future urban planning outside of Paris which he states only proves the fact that Paris itself is lost, since its future is in its outskirts.

With the Situationist International, the L. I. critique of architecture is moving more and more towards a sociological and political critique. Where the L. I. stays relatively within the realm of architecture, the Situationist refine and push it towards a socio-political and economic critique of society. Also in addition to the L. I.'s critiques, the S. I. tries to promote an architecture that will encourage play, dreams, and different realities in the individuals who frequent those spaces. They strive for an architecture that will enrich creativity and inspire emotional reactions in people. However this architecture was never really achieved by the S. I., as it increasingly understood that the dominant capitalist hegemony would have to be overthrown before such an extensive project could begin. Nonetheless, despite this, we can still observe that the S. I. was initially intent on unifying art and everyday life in hopes of transforming everyday life.

Although a loose organization, the Lettrist International had a profound influence on the Situationist International. In many ways the L. I.'s vision was incorporated within the S. I.'s more conscious affirmation to enter and influence everyday life. The S. I. expanded and refined many of the ideas and practices that were present in the Lettrist International in an effort to make them cohere with its desires to directly intervene within everyday life and transform it through art.

Dada and the Situationist International

Dada was a brief movement that lasted approximately two years from 1919 to 1921 and at its peak had about half a dozen members. The movement was grounded on the principle of unrest; its goal was to destroy the institution of art and the political system. Dada's practices included performances designed to outrage the conventional, a desire to shock, and a nihilism that alluded to complete freedom. Udo Rukser, an early Dadaist, defined it in the 1920 "Dada Almanac" as:

a stratagem by which the artist can impart to the citizen something of the inner unrest which prevents the artist himself from being lulled to sleep by custom and routine. By means of external stimuli, he can compensate for the citizen's lack of inner urgency and vitality and shake him into a new life.⁶⁵

This notion of shaking citizens into a new life was one of the ideas that infiltrated the S. I. some forty-years after Dada's dissolution. Dada's credo was art for art's sake, meaning the idea of doing art, not for sale or for art education, but simply for the enjoyment of the artistic process and experimentation. Dada saw art as a way to cure man of the frenzy of war and as a means of protest:

Disgusted by the butchery of World War I, we devoted ourselves to the Fine Arts. Despite the remote booming of artillery we sang, painted, pasted, and wrote poetry with all our might and main. We were seeking an elementary art to cure man of frenzy of the time and a new order to restore the balance between heaven and hell. This art rapidly became a subject of general disapproval. It was not surprising to us that the bandits were unable to understand us. In their puerile megalomania and power-madness, they demanded that art

⁶⁵ Udo Rukser, "Dada Almanac," Lipstick Traces, Greil Marcus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 200.

itself must serve to brutalize mankind.⁶⁶

The idea to revolutionize the world with art was one that infiltrated every avant-garde movement since and would culminate in the S. I.'s systematic critique and negation of modern society. It is no wonder that the S. I. was so fond of Dada, since their manifesto was the complete negation of art and modern society. Michèle Bernstein, in 1983, commented on the enormous admiration the S. I. had for Dada:

Finishing off art; declaring in the heart of a cathedral that God is dead; plotting to blow up the Eiffel Tower. . . The domain we meant to replace was the real scandal. . . Everyone is the son of many fathers, There was the father we hated, which was Surrealism. And there was the father we loved which was Dada. We were the children of both.⁶⁷

We notice the similarities in the statements between the Dadaist Arp and Michèle Bernstein, the Situationist. Both sought to do away with art and to change the world. Both saw the fine arts as a way to accomplish this; Dada with the degradation of art, namely to render it meaningless by ridiculing art practices and the traditional rules concerning those practices; and the Situationist International by dedicating itself to the creation of situations, and only practicing types of arts that negated hegemonic and institutional recuperation.

The Situationist International expanded on Dada by attacking the dominant hegemony through an extensive critique of its hegemonic practices and by taking this critique into the streets with its participation in the events of May 68 (see Chapter 4). Dada itself was primarily relegated

⁶⁶ Arp, "Untitled Article," Lipstick Traces, Greil Marcus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 194.

⁶⁷ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 181.

to the Cabaret Voltaire in the old quarters of the city of Zurich. Nonetheless, Dada had a profound effect on all avant-garde movements that came after it. Debord would show his gratitude to the movement at the inception of Situationist International by stating:

the Dada spirit has. . . influenced all movements that have come after it; and any future constructive position must include a Dadaist-type negative aspect, as long as social conditions that impose the repetition of rotten superstructures—conditions that have intellectually already been definitively condemned—have not been wiped out by force.⁶⁸

Despite this gracious statement, Debord goes on to comment that the same negative aspect that he applauds in Dada was the reason for Dada's dissolution. By having a purely negative definition like the Lettrist International, Dada had trapped itself into a position of inertia that was increasingly becoming uncompromising to it and the rest of society.

Its violent manifestations in postwar Germany and France aimed mainly at the destruction of art and literature. . . is to have delivered a mortal blow to the traditional conception of culture. The almost immediate dissolution [and inertia] of Dadaism was the result of its purely negative definition.⁶⁹

What the Situationist International did to avoid the same fate as Dada was to include a positive mandate which called for the reconstitution of life on a new foundation. One that:

revolutionary action within culture must aim to enlarge life, not merely to express or explain it. it must attack misery on every front. . . it must abolish the exploitation of humanity, but also the passions, compensations and habits which that exploitation had engendered. We have to define new desires in relation to present possibilities. . . We have

⁶⁸ Guy Debord, Report on the Construction of Situations (Paris: www.situationist.cjb.net, 1957) 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

[image 6]

L.H.O.O.Q.

L.H.O.O.Q., 1919 (n° 121)

Pl. 22

to find the first elements of a superior construction of the environment and new conditions of behavior.⁷⁰

Architecture was the basis on which the S. I. was to reconstruct their new vision of society. By not limiting themselves to a purely negative definition, namely the negation of art and society, they avoided the dissolution that had done away with Dada and they avoided not having to completely do away with art practices. On this basis, they could practice certain arts that negated recuperation and drove for the unification of art and everyday life. For the Situationist International, art was not for the sake of doing art itself as it had been previously for Dada, instead, art was for the complete transformation of everyday life.

Another powerful influence that Dada exerted on both the Lettrist International and the Situationist International was its techniques for ridiculing art. The S. I. and the L. I.'s use of *détournement* was influenced by Dada's aesthetic subversions. Of course, Dada strictly used its practices within the realm of art. Nonetheless, Dada's ability to take an object or artistic image and mock its meaning, including the context in which the object or image is used had a profound impact on the L. I. and Situationist International. Like Dada, the L. I. would also use aesthetic subversion or *détournement* strictly within the realm of art. However the Situationist International would apply it to any aspect of everyday life they could find.

An example of Dada's aesthetic subversion is Marcel Duchamp's *Mona Lisa with a Moustache*, L.H.O.O.Q. [image 6]. Painted in 1921, the image ridicules Leonardo Da Vinci's

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 6.

Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz

THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS

[image 7]

painting, The Mona Lisa, through the application of a moustache under her nose. By doing this, Duchamp mocks the traditional notion of what constitute a masterpiece and the notion of the artistic genius. He inverts the traditional meaning that the dominant hegemony and its art institution attributes to the painting. He demystifies it in the sense that it loses its value as a powerful hegemonic object within the institution of art. By defacing the image, the image becomes an object of ridicule, it loses its hegemonic ideology as an object of genius within the art institution. Also worth mentioning is that the letters, “L.H.O.O.Q.” are a French code for “she’s got a hot ass” which further ridicules this classic hegemonic image.

Another example by Duchamp which is a variation of his Mona Lisa, is his Urinal or Fountain piece [image 7]. Duchamp took an ordinary public urinal out of its original context and applied it into a new context, the institution of art. The event was scandalous, but what the piece did was to directly question the hegemonic art institution and its methods of attributing value to an artwork. Duchamp’s piece asks the question: what is considered art? Is it simply what appears in a gallery or museum? This is *détournement* at its best. Duchamp uses art and artistic conventions and turns them in onto themselves. These techniques of demystification and decontextualization which are a major part of his artworks became the core of the L. I.’s and the S. I.’s practice of *détournement*. What the S. I. did differently than Duchamp is to expand on these techniques by applying them to every aspect of social life. Everything and anything became susceptible to the S. I.’s practice of *détournement*. If Dada and Duchamp’s vision was to turn art in onto itself, then the S. I.’s vision was to turn modern society in onto itself through the practice of *détournement* and the revolution of everyday life. The S. I. used *détournement* anywhere they

[image 8]

Clandestine Tract in Spain. "There's nothing better than sleeping with an Asturian miner. Now there you have real men!"

saw fit, any advertisement, any newspaper article, any phrase, any text etc. was fair game susceptible to its inversion [image 8].

Conclusion

In its initial phase, the Situationist International was a critical elaboration of previous avant-garde movements and their art. Although the movement would eventually expand into an all out critique of society, in its early phase, the S. I. utilized different variations of the practices that originated in previous avant-garde movements in its efforts to unify art and everyday life and revolutionize it. Ultimately, the S. I. sought to use its elaborated practices to subvert the dominant hegemony and to encourage the revolution of everyday life. For the S. I. the revolution of everyday life would finally constitute a new world order in which people's individual relationships to one another and within society would be less oppressive and less alienated.

Through its innovative practices and ideas, the S. I. transformed debates on art. First, its innovative aesthetic practices opened new possibilities of what art could consist of, and secondly its ideas and practices proved to be a formative attempt at both destroying art as an institution and at re-integrating art into the everyday life. Ultimately, the S. I. wanted art to have a direct political effect on everyday life in order that art could be directed towards social transformation. Although the S. I. became disgruntled with its cultural aesthetic practices after 1962, arguing that art was not a direct means to the revolution of everyday life, in its initial phase the movement was definitely part of the avant-garde tradition, inspired by all significant avant-garde movements that

came before it.

Chapter 2

The Politicization of the Situationist International and its relationship to Henri Lefebvre

After bringing art into everyday life with moderate success, the French section of the S. I. became radicalized and politicized because the revolution of everyday life did not occur. As a result, the French section eventually negated art and expelled the artistic factions of the movement in order to focus on both a socio-economic critique of capitalism and directly intervening into everyday life. After 1962, the French S. I. became a revolutionary organization focused on encouraging political revolution. It did away with its previous avant-garde stance and its cultural aesthetic practices that were not directly political. As a result, the French S. I. influenced aesthetic debates by acknowledging that art was not a direct means to political revolution. In contrast, now the S. I. wanted to use direct political action to revolutionize everyday life.

This chapter will be subdivided into two parts. In part one, I will show that the French section of the S. I. was becoming increasingly disgruntled with aesthetics because the unification of art and everyday life was not directly resulting in the revolution of everyday life. I will discuss the break between the different factions of the S. I. in 1962, arguing that the Situationist International's criticism of art is very similar to Peter Burger's theory concerning the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements. I will also examine the politicization of S. I., arguing that the S. I.'s actions and critique were increasingly becoming radical. In part two, I will examine the S. I.'s theoretical and personal relationship with Henri Lefebvre. I will discuss their theoretical similarities and their theoretical differences, along with their feud that resulted in the expulsion of

Lefebvre from the Situationist International. The break between Lefebvre and the S. I. was primarily due to the fact that the S. I. felt that Lefebvre's critique was not radical enough for the direction the movement was headed in.

The Politicization of the Situationist International 1957 to 1967

(Part 1)

In its first phase, dating from 1957 to 1959, the S. I.'s conferences and art exhibits primarily revolved around the ideas of unitary urbanism, détournement, dérive and psychogeography. During this early period, a number of prominent painters and artists from a variety of European countries joined the group and became involved in the S. I.'s various activities and publications. These members came from such countries as Algeria, Belgium, England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, and Sweden, increasing the S. I.'s membership to approximately 20 or 30 members, depending on the year. It was during this period that the S. I. truly became an international movement, held together through both organized annual conferences; (1957, Cosio d'Arroscia, Italy; 1958, Paris, France; 1959, Munich, Germany; 1960, London, England; 1961, Goteborg, Sweden; 1962, Antwerp, Belgium) and their journals. The S. I.'s journal, published once or twice a year out of Paris, enabled the group to disseminate its ideas concerning its cultural practices and the revolution of everyday life. Their journals were organized by a revolving editorial committee comprised of different national members within the Situationist

International.⁷¹

Nonetheless, even in this early phase, artists and theorists were divided in their aims. Artists wanted to dissect individual art forms and apply them to the creation of situations which were described “as constructed encounters and creatively lived moments in specific urban settings, instances of a critically transformed everyday life”⁷². At the same time, theorists wanted to develop lines of arguments against aspects of modern society such as alienation. Although these differences did not surface until 1961 and 1962, the divisions in the S. I.’s program were present from its inception. Nevertheless, in its early years, the S. I. wanted to produce settings for different situations and experimental models for the transformation of the modern city. Secondly, they wanted to agitate and to argue against what they saw as “the sterility. . . and oppression of the ruling economic and political system”⁷³. Consequently, I will now outline some of the S. I.’s cultural productions between 1957 and 1959. However, I will not delve too deeply into these production since this would take us away from our focus, which is the politicization of the Situationist International.

From the point view of art, 1957 to 1959, were the most productive years for the Situationist International. Various artists held major exhibitions across Europe. Asger Jorn displayed his détourned paintings at the Rive Gauche gallery in Paris. The paintings were secondhand canvases that he had purchased at some flea markets and then repainted [image 9].

⁷¹ Elizabeth Sussman, On the Passage of a Few Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957-1972 (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1989) 22-23.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 23.

3.4
Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio
Caverna dell'antimateria
(Cavern of Anti-Matter), 1959

[image 10]

[image 11]

His détourned paintings were meant to portray the practice of détournement, the taking of an object or image and altering its message or what it signifies in order to subvert the original intent of the piece. An example is Jorn's painting, Two Penguins, originally a portrait, the painting has now been altered by the juxtaposition of some painted penguins over the two images. The effect is that the painting becomes an object of ridicule rather than a representational image. It has been altered from its original purpose. Hence, in this respect, Jorn's image is similar to Duchamp's Mona Lisa with Moustache, L.H.O.O.Q., which I have examined in the previous chapter, in the sense that both paintings have been altered into objects of ridicule.

In 1959, Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, a member of the Italian S. I., held a show titled, Cavern of Anti-Matter, at the Gallerie René Drouin. In his show, the gallery space was covered with a large canvas, painted to represent an abstract web of paint. The viewer was meant to be an integral part of the show in the sense that once he entered the gallery he would at once be inside the constructed situation, both completing the work and actively participating within the work of art, as the active element of the piece. The piece was meant to be an experiment in psychogeography and unitary urbanism in the sense that by covering every section of the gallery with canvas and paint the gallery became the art work. By drifting through the gallery space the viewer could have a psychogeographical experience, due to the fact that the abstract canvas hallways constantly enveloped him. Anywhere he went within the gallery and anywhere he looked would be the abstract web of Gallizio's constructed situation [image 10].

Later in 1959, Constant A. Nieuwehuis exhibited a number of his model precincts [image 11] at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. His show was titled, New Babylon, and was a mini

[image 12]

[image 13]

model of what a unitary urbanist environment would look like within a Situationist city. The exhibition was made up of drafts and models of a utopian city where the S. I.'s practices of *dérive* and psychogeography could be maximized to their fullest. Within the experimental city there were changing zones for free play, whose nomadic inhabitants could collectively decide the climate, the sensory environment and the organization of space [image 12]. The aim of this Situationist city was always to maximize play and *dérive* [image 13]. According to Ivan Chtcheglov, a member of the French section of the Situationist International, "the principle activity of the inhabitants will be the continuous drift. . . the changing of landscapes from one hour to the next will result in complete disorientation"⁷⁴. In general, these art exhibits were meant to be experiments in the practice of *détournement*, unitary urbanism, *dérive* and the creation of situations.

Similar to the themes of these early S. I. art exhibitions, Debord's film entitled, On the Passage of Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Period of Time, which was made in 1959, dealt with the creation of situations, unitary urbanism and a critique of modern society. Also in the film, Debord outlined the S. I.'s mandate for the creation of situation and its attempt to revolutionize everyday life. For example, the film's narrator states that it is now:

increasingly necessary, [for] a direct construction of all aspects of a liberated, affective and practical existence. . . in a quest of another use of the urban landscape, in quest of new passions. . . The urban environment proclaimed the order and tastes of the ruling society just as violently as the newspapers. . . They maintained the coherent reign of poverty. it['s] necessary to change everything by a unitary struggle, or nothing. . . That which should be abolished continues. . . We are engulfed. We are separated. The years pass and we have

⁷⁴ Simon Sadler, Situationist City (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1998) 138.

not changed anything. . . The only interesting venture is the liberation of everyday life.⁷⁵

The film ends with a sequence of disconnected images which are meant to symbolize separation and isolation within modern society. Nonetheless, the film is similar to the art exhibits in its attempt to critique society and its architecture, while calling for the construction of situations and new living conditions that will unite passions, create new passions, and encourage the revolution of everyday life.

During this period, the S. I. conferences dealt with the same theoretical concepts and practices that both Debord's film and the art exhibits engaged in. Conferences were held once year between 1957 to 1962. After the break-up of the S. I. in 1962, conferences became sporadic. The 1957 to 1959 conferences were concerned with *dérive* and the construction of situations. For example, the transcript of the second S. I. conference, held in June 1958, was primarily concerned with administrative duties of the S. I. and its practices:

The second conference of the Situationist International met in Paris, . . . [The conference was] concerned particularly with the development of . . . editorial activity, the organization of *dérive* by several groups in radio contact, and the preliminary positions on the application of certain ambient constructions.⁷⁶

This preoccupation with the construction of situations, *dérive* and unitary urbanism was taken up in the third S. I. conference held in Munich in April of 1959. At the end of this conference a declaration was published outlining and defining the key concepts that provided the basis of the S.

⁷⁵ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle and other Films* (London: Rebel Press, 1992) 31-36.

⁷⁶ Guy Debord, "The Second S. I. Conference," *Internationale Situationiste*#1 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1958) 1.

I.'s mandate during these early years. For example, the declaration titled, The Amsterdam

Declaration, outlined that:

1. The Situationist must take every opportunity to oppose retrograde forces and ideologies, in culture. . . 2. The S. I.'s minimum program is the development of complete environments, which must extend to a unitary urbanism. 3. Unitary urbanism is defined as the complex, ongoing activity that consciously recreates man's environment according to the most advanced conceptions in every domain. . . 4. The construction of a situation. . . is a means for unitary urbanism, just as unitary urbanism is the indispensable basis for the construction of situations, in both play and seriousness, in a freer society.⁷⁷

As we can see, in this early phase, the S. I. is united in its idea of unitary urbanism, *dérive*, constructed situations and the idea of revolutionizing everyday life through the unification of art and the praxis of life. During these early years, the S. I. films, art exhibits and conferences were directed at exploring and refining these cultural practices and concepts. However, despite being united early on, the S. I. did decide to expel some of its factions. For example, six months after the group was formed, the S. I. expelled the Italian section, maintaining that that this faction was too idealist and that its reactionary theses abstained from any self-criticism:

the second conference. . . proceeded with purging of the Italian section, in which a faction had developed, maintaining idealist and reactionary theses which were refuted and condemned by the majority, then abstaining from all self-criticism. The conference thereby decided on the exclusion of Walter Olmo, Piero Simondo and Edna Verrone.⁷⁸

These early expulsions illustrate that a rift was growing between the different sections of the

⁷⁷ Constant A. Nieuwenhuis and Guy Debord, "The Amsterdam Declaration," Internationale Situationiste#2 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1958) 1.

⁷⁸ Guy Debord, "The Second S. I. Conference," Internationale Situationiste#1 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1958) 1.

Situationist International and that these divisions were slowly coming to the forefront of the movement.

In fact, the 1960 conference would prove to be the beginning of the end of the international factions. Over the next couple of years the French S. I. increasingly purged itself of other factions, reducing its membership to about six members, all social theorists residing in Paris under the direction of Guy Debord. The reason for the break is that the French section of the S. I. was increasingly becoming disgruntled with aesthetics. Although its cultural practices were increasingly joined to everyday life and acting within everyday life, these new cultural practices and concepts were not directly resulting in the revolution of everyday life. From 1960 to 1962, the S. I. was fraught with conflicts concerning its cultural productions and its status as an avant-garde movement. Hence, after 1962, the S. I. became more of a revolutionary organization rather than an avant-garde by negating its previous aesthetic practices and concentrating on both a socio-economic critique of capitalism and direct intervention in everyday life.

Although the politicization of the S. I. was always present in its early years with the revolution of everyday life, direct political intervention was always sought through cultural aesthetic practices. However, with the moderate success of their cultural aesthetic practices, the French section became increasingly politicized. The politicization of the S. I. began approximately around 1960 with the fourth S. I. conference in London. At this conference, the primary concerns of the S. I. became centered on the question: "To what extent is the S. I. a political

movement?"⁷⁹. This question cut at the center of the movement in the sense that artists wanted the movement to continue with its cultural aesthetic experiments, while the S. I. theorists increasingly pushed for a socio-economic critique of capitalism and for political revolution. For example, in an article written in 1961, titled "Instructions for Taking Up Arms", Debord stated that it was now apparent that only through a revolutionary organization and political revolution would broad social change occur. Hence, according to Debord, the S. I. would have to broaden its field of activity, if it was to have a definite impact on society:

Today the revolutionary project stands accused . . . of having failed, of having engendered a new alienation. This amounts to recognizing that the ruling society has proved capable of defending itself, . . . much better than revolutionaries expected. . . Revolution has to be reinvented, that's all. . . People's creativity and participation can only be awakened by a collective project explicitly concerned with all aspects of lived experience. . . the different moments of situationist activity until now can only be understood in the perspective of a reappearance of revolution, a revolution that will be social as well as cultural and whose field of action will right from the start have to be broader. . . This means that we must reject the vestiges . . . of specialized artistic activity.⁸⁰

As we can see from Debord's statement, the French S. I. was becoming radicalized and was, in effect, calling for the negation of aesthetic activities and for the creation of a revolutionary organization. This politicization of the S. I. only increased after 1960 as Debord increasingly concentrated on a socio-economic critique and the creation of his revolutionary organization. For example in his 1961 film, Critique of Separation, he states that new methods must be devised in

⁷⁹ Guy Debord, "The Fourth S. I. Conference in London." Internationale Situationiste#5 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1960) 1.

⁸⁰ Guy Debord, "Instructions for Taking Up Arms," Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 63-64.

order to subvert the current cultural and political order since previous methods have brought undesirable results:

So many things we have wanted have not been attained; or partially and not like we thought. . . The problem is not that people live more or less poorly; but that they live in a way that is always out of their control. . . we [must] contest the totality. . . the solid environment of boredom. . . We have invented nothing. . . [thus] it is necessary to go beyond this partial defeat. . . All conclusions remain to be drawn, everything has to be recalculated. . . I have scarcely begun to make you understand that I don't intend to play the game.⁸¹

Consequently, as we can see from the film's monologue, Debord and the French S. I. are at an impasse due to the fact their previous methods for the revolution of everyday life are not succeeding. For Debord, the group's practices needed to be recalculated if it was to have an impact. The culmination of the French S. I.'s dissatisfaction with aesthetics and its cultural practices would surface in 1961, with Raoul Vaneigem's declaration that the S. I.'s art was simply "elaborating the spectacle (i.e. capitalism). . . and that. . . for the destruction of the spectacle. . . The [S. I.] must precisely cease to be works of art. . . Once and for all. . . our position is that of combatants"⁸². With this statement the French S. I. began to reorganize its revolutionary project and purged itself of artists, which indirectly meant that all foreign sections of the S. I. were expelled. The main issue for the breakup was the French S. I.'s belief that aesthetics had to be completely negated if the group was to have a chance at directly revolutionizing everyday life.

After the split in 1962, the expelled factions reestablished themselves under a Second

⁸¹ Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle and other Films (London: Rebel Press, 1992) 43-55.

⁸² Raoul Vaneigem, "The Fifth S. I. Conference in Goteborg," Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knapp (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 88.

Situationist International called the Situationist Bauhaus. Although I will not extensively examine the Situationist Bauhaus and its dealings, it is nonetheless important that I give a brief outline. The Situationist Bauhaus was organized from the expelled Dutch, German, and Scandinavian sections. Its new base of operations was a country house located on the outskirts of Stockholm, Sweden. The movement continued to experiment with unitary urbanism and continued to publish an annual journal titled, The Situationist Times. However as time passed the Situationist Bauhaus slowly abandoned its various aesthetic projects concerning the Situationist city and eventually disbanded in the late 1960's.

Returning to the Situationist International, now comprising only the French section, this new S. I. no longer tolerated attempts to use aesthetics to revolutionize everyday life. Their previous cultural practices such as psychogeography, *dérive* and unitary urbanism were all terminated because Debord believed these practices could not succeed until political revolution triumphed. He stated in late 1961 that:

Until a . . .revolutionary praxis [passes] . . . It is absolutely pointless to enter into discussion with those who would ask us to what extent is [unitary urbanism] feasible, concrete [or] practical for the simple reason that nowhere [can] there exist any theory or practice concerning the creation of cities, or any kind of behavior that relates to it.⁸³

For Debord and the new S. I., no alternative could take shape until the despotic force of capitalism was destroyed. Only after political revolution could the S. I.'s urbanism be realized. Similar to Debord, Khayati and Vaneigem stated that although the S. I.'s newly "invented. . .

⁸³ Guy Debord, "Critique of Urbanism," Internationale Situationiste#6 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1961) 1-3.

architecture and urbanism [could] not be realized without the revolution of everyday life”⁸⁴. With its new stance on aesthetics, the S. I. acknowledge that its cultural aesthetic practices were not a direct means to the revolution of everyday life. Only after the revolution could their new aesthetic forms and alternative architectures be implemented and succeed. However, despite the fact that the S. I. negated aesthetics, since it was not a direct means to political revolution, *détournement* and graffiti did survive because both had become directly political (see Chapter 4). In addition, *détournement* survived because within its definition lay the possibility for the direct and total subversion of capitalism. Consequently, for S. I. only political revolution could now directly “create . . . a situation that goes beyond the point of no return”⁸⁵.

Debord’s critique of the avant-garde after 1962 is similar to Peter Burger’s theory of the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde. According to Peter Burger, the original avant-garde movements of Dada and Surrealism failed in their attempts to destroy the institution of art and return art to the praxis of life, (i.e. everyday life). Because they failed to destroy the institution of art, their aesthetic practices were eventually re-appropriated and reintegrated back within the art institutions, becoming another style of art. For example, Burger states:

now that the attack of the historical avant-garde movements on art as an institution has failed, and . . . art as an institution continues to survive as something separate from the praxis of life. . . The category [art] ‘work’ is not merely given a new lease on life after the failure of the avant-gardiste attempt to reintroduce art into the praxis of life; it has actually expanded. . . [For example] the *objet trouvé*. . . is recognized today as ‘work of art’. The *objet trouvé* thus loses its [original Dada] character as anti-art and becomes, in the

⁸⁴ Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1998) 161.

⁸⁵ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 417-418.

museum, [another] autonomous work among others.⁸⁶

Burger believes that any new avant-garde movement such as the Situationist International simply sublimates the intentions of previous avant-garde movements due to the fact that any new avant-garde practices claiming to be anti-art and attempting to unify art and the praxis of life no longer have the protest value of the previous Dada and Surrealist manifestations. Neo-avant-garde practices have lost their shock value because their new versions of anti-art simply mimic the aesthetic style of Dada and Surrealism which have already been appropriated back within the institution of art. Their “anti-art” styles now reinforces the institution of art. For example Burger states:

today, of course, attempts are made to continue the tradition of the avant-garde movements. . . But these attempts, such as happenings, for example, which could be called neo-avant-gardiste, can no longer attain the protest value of Dadaist manifestations, even though they may be prepared and executed more perfectly than the former. In part this is owing to the avant-gardistes’ effects having lost their shock value. . . [Hence] the resumption of avant-gardiste intentions with the means of avant-gardism can no longer even have the limited effectiveness the historical avant-garde achieved. . . [since] the means by which the avant-gardistes hoped to bring about the sublimation of art have attained the status of works of art [within the institution of art]. . . [therefore] the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardist intentions.⁸⁷

From this perspective, the S. I.’s initial cultural aesthetic practices only increased the institutionalization of the art and the intentions of previous avant-gardes. Nevertheless, the early

⁸⁶ Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 57.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

S. I. always claimed that its cultural aesthetic practices were never truly avant-garde and that the movement was based on a contradiction. For example Vaneigem and Khayati stated in 1960 that:

There was no such thing as Situationism, or a Situationist work of art. . . Since the beginning of the movement there has been a problem as to what to call artistic works by members of the S. I. . . .It was understood that none of them was a Situationist production . . . I propose . . .to call them “anti-situationist”.⁸⁸

According to these members, practicing the style of anti-art was a method of elaborating and exploring certain truths which could be eventually applied directly to subvert capitalism, “we know that such works will be co-opted by the society and used against us. Our impact lies in the elaboration of certain truths which have an explosive [political] power whenever people are ready to struggle”⁸⁹. Hence, the S. I. always understood that it was contradicting avant-garde intentions by practicing Dada and Surrealist styles of anti-art.

Nonetheless, as I have already mentioned, the French S. I. eventually negated its cultural aesthetic practices due to the fact it understood this contradiction of neo-avant-garde movements. Consequently, the S. I. left the avant-garde and became a revolutionary organization. In fact, Debord’s criticism of the neo-avant-gardes is similar to Peter Burger’s own critique in the sense that Debord and the new S. I. stated in 1963 that “the time for art is over. . . [avant-garde] art can be realized only by being suppressed”⁹⁰. Hence, for both Debord and Peter Burger, the avant-

⁸⁸ Mustapha Khayati and Raoul Vaneigem, “The Fourth S. I. Conference in London,” Internationale Situationiste#5 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1960) 1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 1.

⁹⁰ Guy Debord, “Response to a Questionnaire,” Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knapp (Berkeley California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 145.

garde has essentially come to an end. As a result, Debord and the new S. I. no longer considered themselves artists, “we are artists only insofar as we are no longer artists”⁹¹. For this reason, after the split, the French S. I. moved into the political realm in hopes of directly intervening within everyday life.

The new S. I. concentrated on developing itself as a revolutionary organization. In a 1963 article titled “Questionnaire”, the new S. I. defined itself as a revolutionary organization and not a political movement; since its main concern was to encourage political revolution rather than hold political office.

The words “political movement” today connote the specialized activity of heads of groups and parties who derive from the organized passivity of their militants the oppressive force of their future power. The S. I. wants to have nothing in common with hierarchical power, no matter what form it may take. The S. I. is thus neither a political movement nor a sociology of political mystification. The S. I. aims to represent the highest degree of international revolutionary consciousness. . . we are working towards the theoretical and practical organization of a new revolutionary movement.⁹²

This distinction by the S. I. between a political movement and a revolutionary organization marks an important step in the group’s politicization in the sense that it is clear that the group is defining itself as a revolutionary organization bent on political revolution. More examples of the politicization of the S. I. can be found in its journal articles between 1964 and 1967. They are increasingly directed towards a socio-economic critique and political revolution. For example, a 1966 article entitled “Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organizations”, the S. I. outlines that

⁹¹ Guy Debord, “Questionnaire,” Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knapp (Berkeley California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 139.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 139-146.

the purpose for its existence is for the direct abolition of all classes:

the only purpose of [our] revolutionary organization is the abolition of all existing classes in a way that does not bring about a new division of society. . .[Our] organization makes a unitary critique of the world. . .By unitary critique we mean a comprehensive critique of all geographical areas where various forms of separate socio-economic powers exist, as well as a comprehensive critique of all aspects of life. . .the radical critique of political economy, the supersession of the commodity and of wage labor.⁹³

Subsequently, the S. I.'s unitary critique of capitalism would be expressed in Debord's 1967 book titled, The Society of the Spectacle. Without getting into the specifics of Debord's unitary critique given that his book will be extensively discussed in the next chapter, he primarily argues that within our new age of mass production, humans are totally dominated by the capitalism. He explains that capitalism has grown and intensified to such an extent that it completely mediates all relationships within society. Debord classifies this new stage of capital development as the all-encompassing "spectacle". Debord also briefly outlines elements of his unitary critique in articles such as "The World of Which We Speak (1964)" and "Captive Words (1966)". For example, in the first article, he states that:

in today's society, all aspects of technological development and. . .communication serve to produce the greatest possible passive isolation. . .by a direct permanent contact that operates in one direction only, that is, by incitements (to which one cannot respond) that are broadcast by all sorts of leaders.⁹⁴

Although brief, his unitary critique of mass communication technologies shows that the S. I. is

⁹³ Guy Debord, "Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organization," Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knapp (Berkeley California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 223.

⁹⁴ Guy Debord, "The World of Which We Speak," Internationale Situationiste#9 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1964) 1.

heading towards a socio-economic critique of society. In fact, this analysis of mass communication will be a central tenet in Debord's Society of the Spectacle (more will be said on this point in the next chapter). In the "Captive Words" article, Debord outlines other important aspects of his unitary critique in the sense that he reveals that society is filled with "banalities. . . [that] work for the dominant organization of life"⁹⁵. According to him, these banalities serve only to hide the enormous bureaucratic power that the economy and the government institutions hold over individuals. He states:

Bureaucracy . . . control[s]. . . all aspects of social life. . . all communication is channeled through bureaucracy, people no longer even need to talk to each other: their first duty is to play their role as receivers in the network of informationist communication to which the whole society is reduced. . . People are required in their acts, their thoughts and their feelings to behave as . . . the state proclaims. . . "power creates nothing, it recuperates". . . [Nonetheless] the divorce between theory and practice provides the central basis for . . . our project of . . . liberation.⁹⁶

Again, we can clearly see that Debord and the S. I. are politicized, their analysis increasingly perceiving trends in society in a unitary way. Also, the article hints at the fact that Debord and the S. I. are increasingly looking to Marx's analysis to understand the new social and economic developments within capitalist society. For example, Debord's dictum that power creates nothing, but instead only recuperates, is a direct liaison to Marx's claim that "capital does not

⁹⁵ Guy Debord, "Captive Words," Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knapp (Berkeley California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 170.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 172-173.

create objective conditions. . . rather, it . . . buys [or appropriates] objective conditions”⁹⁷.

Although the similarities between Debord’s unitary critique and Marx’s analysis will be extensively discussed in the next chapter, it is vital to show that Debord and the S. I. are directed towards a socio-economic critique and a revolutionary theory based on Marx’s economic analysis and his revolutionary project.

Another indication that the S. I. is politicized is its criticism of other revolutionary organizations. According to the S. I., revolutionary organizations working within industrialized nations were not doing enough to escalate class conflicts and were not attempting to unite their various struggles into a massive oppositional force. In an article entitled “Address to Revolutionaries of Algeria and of all Countries”, the S. I. claims that although there is strife, dissidence and conflicts within the most industrial nations around the world, nothing close to a revolution is occurring:

Everywhere there are social confrontations, but nowhere is the old order liquidated. . . Everywhere revolutionaries, but nowhere the revolution. . . The new revolutionary current, wherever it appears, must begin to link up the present contestatory experiences and the people who bear them. And along with unifying such groups, it must at the same time unify the coherent basis of their project. [This is] the first gesture of the coming revolutionary epoch.⁹⁸

True to its word, the S. I. began actively participating in political conflicts: first, by participating in the activities of the student union at Strasbourg University and second, by actively participating

⁹⁷ Karl Marx, “Grundrisse,” The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978) 270.

⁹⁸ The Situationist International, “Addresss to Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries,” Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knapp (Berkeley California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 148-142.

in the May 68 upheavals. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this chapter, I will only examine the S. I.'s election to the University of Strasbourg since the Situationist International's participation in the events of May 68 will be extensively examined later on in chapter four.

According to Greil Marcus' book Lipstick Traces, the 1966 Strasbourg event, with its pranks, news reports and overall dissent directed at the French government, was "perhaps the first concrete manifestation of a revolt aiming quite openly at the destruction of society"⁹⁹. According to Marcus, the event began when five students who were bored with their classes and angry at the left-wing politics of student movements, proclaimed "their desire to see the government-sanctioned student union ruined"¹⁰⁰ and became candidates in the student union elections at the University of Strasbourg, which is located near the German border. The union was called the Association Fédérative Générale Des Étudiants de Strasbourg and was sponsored by the Union Nationale des Étudiants de France (UNEF). Amidst high student apathy, these five students were elected as the student union representatives for the university which also gave them access to the union's five hundred thousand dollar budget.¹⁰¹

During their summer vacation, these five students contacted the S. I. and asked for their help to ruin the student union, stating that "we have a piece of power. . .[and] we want to wreck it"¹⁰². The S. I. responded and scheduled a meeting later that summer in which Debord re-emphasized his principle that "a revolutionary organization must always remember that its

⁹⁹ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 413.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 353.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 413.

LA PRÉSIDENCE PASSE ENCORE, MAIS LA TRÉSORÈRIE IL N'EN ÉTAIT PAS QUESTION. ILS CONVAINGUÈRENT AISEMENT UNE PASSANTE, QUE LE HASARD AVAIT MIS SUR LEUR TROTTOIR, DE PRENDRE LE RÔLE PLUS COMPROMETTANT DE TRÉSORIÈRE.

... C'EST L'ANGE EN EFFET LE MÊME
TOUTES LES DISCORDS, DE TOUTES LES
HAINES, DE TOUTES LES AMBITIONS, C'EST
EN LA MORT LE CRÉATEUR DE LA PRÉFÉ-
TE. SI L'ON N'ÉTAIT PLUS OBLIGÉ DE DON-
NER QUELQUE CHOSE EN ÉCHANGE DE
CE QUE NOUS AVONS BESOIN POUR NO-
TRE EXISTENCE, L'OR PERDRAIT SA VA-
LEUR ET PERSONNE NE CHERCHERAIT
ET NE POURRAIT S'ENRICHIR. RIEN
RIEN DE CE QU'IL ANAÏSSERAIT NE
POURRAIT SERVIR À LUI PROCU-
RER UN BIEN ÊTRE SUPÉRIEUR À CELUI
DES AUTRES. DE LA, PLUS BESOIN
DE LOIS, PLUS BESOIN DE MAÎTRES.

LEUR CONNAISSANCE DE LA VIE NE DEVAIT RIEN À LEUR PRÉSENCE ÉPISODIQUE DANS L'ENCEINTE DES FACULTÉS NI AUX QUELQUES DIPLOMES QU'ILS AVAIENT ACQUIS PAR LES MOYENS LES PLUS DIVERS ET LES MOINS AVOUABLES.

DE QUOI T'OCCUPES-TU EXACTEMENT ?

DE LA RÉIFICATION

JE VOIS, C'EST UN TRAVAIL TRÈS SÉRIEUX, AVEC DE GROS LIVRES ET BEAUCOUP DE PAPIERS SUR UNE GRANDE TABLE.

NON, JE ME PROMÈNE. PRINCIPALEMENT JE ME PROMÈNE.

ANACHOL JULES, DIT KOENIGSTEIN
FRANÇOIS, NÉ LE 20 OCTOBRE 1854.
TAILLE 1m66; PROFESSION: TEINTURE
RELATIONS: RÉVOLUTIONNAIRES. CAUSE
DE LA DÉTENTION: DESTRUCTION D'
IMMEUBLES ET DÉTENTION D'ENGINS
EXPLOSIFS.

L'EXCELLENCE DE CE SAVOIR THÉORIQUE NE POU-
VAIT ALLER SANS UNE PRATIQUE APPROPRIÉE. ILS AVAIENT
PEU À PEU SU RECONNAÎTRE CEUX AVEC QUI LA DÉTE-
RIORATION DE LA MACHINE SOCIALE SERAIT UN JEU IM-
PITOYABLE. C'EST AINSI QUE LES POMPALERS AVEC L'
INTERNATIONALE OCCULTE S'ENGAGÈRENT.

POTV: BE NEODIC

objective is not getting people to listen to speeches by expert leaders, but getting them to think for themselves”¹⁰³. Debord stated that the S. I. would only act in an advisory role as this was their own opportunity to have an impact. He suggested the students use the funds to write a critique of student life and society and disseminate the critique using the large union budget. Debord reiterated that they should:

think globally, but act locally. . .remember that though you are risking the careers society has planned for you, there is no protection in compromise, success of a scandal is the only safeguard for those who trigger it, [and] that those who make a revolution by halves only dig their own graves ”.¹⁰⁴

However, the five student representatives did not write their critique and instead asked the S. I. to write it for them. The S. I. eventually agreed but under the condition of anonymity. The first thing the student union representatives published was a short S. I. story about a fictitious “pinhead” sociologist named Abraham Moles who was continuously chased out of his lecture hall by a barrage of tomatoes. The second text was a comic strip entitled, The Return of the Durutti Column [image 14], a comic-strip account of the student-union takeover.

The most controversial publication came when the union published an S. I. manuscript titled, On the Poverty of Student Life, which begins with the caption: “it is pretty safe to say that the student is the most universally despised creature in France, apart from the policeman and the

¹⁰³ Ibid. 415.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 415.

priest”¹⁰⁵. The text goes on to state that under capitalism the student is the “perfect spectator”¹⁰⁶. The text satirizes universities, professors such as Althusser, Barthes, Sartre, Lefebvre and Levi-Strauss, modern culture, the government, the economy, the church and the family. Also, the text argues that there is a new working class taking shape “defined not by labor. . . but made up of everyone who has no power over his own life and knows it”¹⁰⁷. This future proletariat asks for a revolt “against all hierarchy and ideology”¹⁰⁸, for the purpose of promoting autonomy and a history we all can participate in. According to the S. I., this was to be a spontaneous/festive revolution that went beyond the point of no return, (more will be said about this later). According to Marcus, the reaction to the text was severe:

professors, university administrators, city officials, labor-union leaders, editorialists, Communist Party functionaries, the business community, parents, priests, and left-wing and right-wing student groups united to denounce the misappropriation of public funds and the betrayal of positions of public trust--to combat. . . the collapse of decency, morality, order, the university and western civilization.¹⁰⁹

The press named the Situationist International as the culprits behind the scheme, while the student union took advantage of the publicity to spread S. I. publications across Europe. The scandal offered the S. I. an opportunity to invite supporters to occupy the student office building, to steal books and money from campus restaurants, to declare the university “a psychiatric clinic . . . for

¹⁰⁵ Situationist International and Students of Strasbourg, On the Poverty of Student Life (Strasbourg: www.situationist.cjb.net, 1966) 1.

¹⁰⁶ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 416.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 417.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 417.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 418.

mind control”¹¹⁰ and to announce its abolition. The S. I.’s petitions prompted people to question rules and regulations and the government institutions behind them, eventually resulting in disruptions and cancellations of classes.

Although the actions of the S. I. and the five student representatives were legal, after six weeks of chaos in the fall of 1966 the courts stepped in and closed the student union and removed the five students in control thereby returning the University of Strasbourg to relative stability. However, the damage was done and the S. I. proclaimed the event a wonderful act of political *détournement*, proof of *détournement*’s “ability to both devalue and reinvest the heritage of a dead cultural past. . . a student union, for example, recuperated long ago and turned into a paltry agency of repression, . . . [into] a beacon of sedition and revolt”¹¹¹. In addition, while speaking to reporters the S. I. stated that the event was:

a little experiment. . . a modest attempt to create the praxis by which the crisis of this society as a whole can be precipitated. . . a situation was created [at Strasbourg] in which society was forced to finance, publicize and broadcast a revolutionary critique of itself, and furthermore to confirm this critique by its reactions to it.¹¹²

This political scandal helped the S. I. to become well known across France’s university campuses, enabling the movement to capitalize on student dissidence growing on these campuses. The political scandal also allowed the S. I. to play a central role in the May 68 uprisings. Various student organizations in France inspired by the events at Strasbourg began to look to the S. I.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 418.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 419.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 420.

as mentors for similar scandals. For example, after the Strasbourg scandal “more than three hundred thousand copies of On the Poverty of Student Life were printed”¹¹³ in the following year. Small groups formed at colleges across France and modeled themselves after the Strasbourg scandal and petitioned the S. I. for instructions. However, the S. I.’s only instructions were that “they act autonomously [and] that they promote an insurrection”¹¹⁴. As a result, a small group of students at the University of Nanterre calling themselves, “Les Enragés”, and claiming to be sympathetic to the Situationist International and its principles, lit a spark that culminated in the May 68 uprisings and brought the S. I. into the middle of a massive workers strike across France (see Chapter 4).

To briefly summarize the first part of this chapter, we can see from the S. I.’s publications during 1963 and 1967 that the movement was increasingly becoming radical and politicized. The movement published various articles concerning several conflicts occurring around the world. They published small analyses concerning economic exploitation. However, the S. I. did not begin directly intervening into everyday life until the political scandal at the University of Strasbourg in late 1966. The event dramatically increased the movement’s popularity and allowed it to capitalize on student dissidence growing in France. The popularity that the S. I. gained during this event allowed it to play a central role during the May 68 uprisings. In part two of this chapter, I will examine the S. I.’s personal and theoretical relationship to Henri Lefebvre, due to the fact that many of their principles had their origins in Lefebvre’s theoretical analysis of everyday life. It is

¹¹³ Ibid, 426.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 426.

important that I examine their relationship because Henri Lefebvre was a member of the S. I. until 1962. Moreover it is useful to understand their theoretical relationship, before extensively analyzing Debord's socio-economic critique of capitalism in chapter three.

Henri Lefebvre and the Situationist International

(Part 2)

The relationship between Henri Lefebvre and the Situationist International began in the late fifties when Henri Lefebvre, disenchanted with the French communist party's political activism, turned increasingly to avant-garde movements to encourage social change. His dissatisfaction with the communist party stemmed from the fact that he felt the party was not attempting to influence the everyday lives of people. According to Lefebvre, if social change were to occur and sustain itself, the communist party needed to change people's everyday lives, rather than simply resign itself to an economic critique of society. Lefebvre stated that:

instead of examining institutions and classes, structures of economic control and social control, one had to think about moments-moments of love, hate, poetry, frustration, action, surrender, delight, humiliation, justice, cruelty, resignation, surprise, disgust, resentment, self-loathing, pity, fury, peace of mind--those tiny epiphanies [of everyday life]. . .in which absolute possibilities and temporal limits of anyone's existence were revealed. The richness or poverty of any social formation could be judged only in terms of these evanescences.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 144.

Lefebvre's stance eventually resulted in his expulsion from the French communist party in the late fifties and brought him into contact with the S. I. and Guy Debord. Debord by this time had been auditing some of Lefebvre's classes at the University of Strasbourg. Lefebvre and Debord met in 1958, when Situationist member Michèle Bernstein introduced the two after one of Lefebvre's seminars. What attracted the S. I. to Lefebvre was his extensive theoretical work on everyday life and the fact that he had participated in the organization of a 1950's French peasant uprising in support of the Algerian independence movement.¹¹⁶ Years later, Lefebvre would describe his relationship with the newly formed S. I. as a "love story", one where they laid:

aside all mistrust, all ambitions, all schemes. . . In an atmosphere of passionate oneness we would talk far into the night. . . We drank, sometimes there were other stimulants, and these nights had an earnestness, an affection--it was more than communication, it was a communion.¹¹⁷

As a result of their friendship, Lefebvre became a member of the S. I. in late 1958 and remained a member until 1962. He was expelled due in part to accusations of plagiarism and because his critique of everyday life was not considered radical enough. Nonetheless, the impression that both Lefebvre and the S. I. had on each other was substantial. The crux of their theoretical and personal relationship was undeniably the concept of everyday life, the theory of moments, the revolution of everyday life and spontaneous/festive revolution. First and foremost, their theoretical relationship begins with the concept of everyday life and the revolution of everyday life

¹¹⁶ Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 90.

¹¹⁷ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 146.

which Lefebvre analyzed in his 1947 book, The Critique of Everyday Life. In it, Lefebvre wrote that:

In so far as the science of man exists, it finds its material in the 'trivial', the everyday. . . Knowledge and genuine thought pass methodically from the individual scale to the social and national scale. . . [where] we find ourselves [increasingly] faced. . . with a new imperative: the practical, effective transformation of things. . . Everyday life. . . [is] where. . . genuine reality [is] to be found [and] where. . . genuine changes take place. . . [hence] History, psychology and the science of mankind must become a study of everyday life.¹¹⁸

For Lefebvre, everyday life needed thorough study if capitalism's alienation was to be subverted through social transformation and people were to regain control over their lives. According to Lefebvre, everyday life was both a sphere of revolutionary possibilities and the sphere where theory and practice came together. As a result, Lefebvre stated that any social changes or effective idea had to locate itself in this sphere of society:

Unity of theory and practice--this tenet dominates and sums up living Marxism. . . Individuals and private consciousness can only become a creative force through a theory and actions which unites them as a totality, an active mass, . . . [it is] everyday life which demands this unity, and develops it. It is in [everyday] life-- that forms of organization and effective ideas are to be found.¹¹⁹

For Lefebvre, theory had to be lived by people in their everyday experience. He called on all disciplines to study everyday life in order that a Marxist pragmatism could be devised that could lead to the revolution of everyday life. The S. I. had been unintentionally doing this since their

¹¹⁸ Henri Lefebvre, The Critique of Everyday Life (London: Verso, 1947) 133-137.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 182-183.

days as the Lettrist International and Cobra, when they had been studying architecture and city planning in order to effectively revolutionize people's everyday lives. Like Lefebvre, the S. I. believed that everyday life held possibilities for social change. It was, according to Debord, "the measure of all things: of (non) fulfillment of human relations; of the use of lived time; of artistic experimentation; and of revolutionary politics"¹²⁰. For the S. I., it was the sphere where any genuine social changes had to take root. It was also the sphere which had to be reclaimed so that people could enhance self-actualization and regain control over their lives. The S. I. argued that:

Everyday life is the very realm over which we should have control, yet it is experienced as mundane and dull in its ubiquity. On the escape from the fragmentation and mediocrity of our own experience, we run blindly towards the promises of wholeness, fulfillment, and unity implicit in the world of the abundant commodity. And it is in the hopelessness of this scramble that disjunction between the possibilities of life and the impoverished realities of survival are most keenly felt; it is here that the revolution becomes a living and immediate possibility.¹²¹

Consequently, the concepts of everyday life and the revolution of everyday life, which were the cornerstones of both Henri Lefebvre and the S. I.'s theory, facilitated their collaborative endeavors. These endeavors included such things as geographical studies, where information on crowd flow and architectural effects were collected, media stunts akin to the Strasbourg affair, and graffiti slogans such as "Under the Paving Stones, the Beach!"¹²² (which was originally conceived by Lefebvre). According to Lefebvre, this slogan symbolized the infinite possibilities for

¹²⁰ Guy Debord, "Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life," Internationale Situationiste#6 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1961) 2.

¹²¹ Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 91.

¹²² Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 32.

the reorganization of communities after the alienating city and the commodity system was destroyed. As a result, during the May 68 upheavals, student protestors began ripping out the cobble stones and hurling them at police.¹²³ Nevertheless, the S. I. expanded on Lefebvre's notion of everyday life, by arguing that everyday life was not merely trivialized by modern capitalism, but had become completely colonized. In an article entitled "Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday life", Debord argued that despite the fact that:

Henri Lefebvre [had] extended the idea of uneven development so as to characterize everyday life as a lagging sector, out of joint with the historical but not completely cut off from it. One could [now] go so far as to term this level of everyday life a colonized sector. . . Everyday life [is now] policed and mystified by every means. . . this society with its rapid growth of technological powers and the forced expansion of its market. . . atomize people into isolated consumers. . . [and] prohibit[s] communication. . . Everyday life is [now] . . . the realm of separation and spectacle. . . [where] people are deprived . . . of communication . . . of self-fulfillment. . . [and] of the opportunity to personally make their own history.¹²⁴

Hence, Debord's notion of everyday life expands on Lefebvre's in the sense that everyday life has become more than trivialized. It has become totally colonized. This new stage of development in everyday life prompted the S. I. to argue that everyday life had become an all-encompassing spectacle, where one's experiences, identity and lifestyle are second-hand representations that have been filtered by the mass media and capitalist industries. For example, in her book The Most Radical Gesture, Sadie Plant states that for the S. I. everyday life was now mere representation where "images and commodities. . . effectively represent [people's] lives, [where] people [now]

¹²³ Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 107.

¹²⁴ Guy Debord, "Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life," Internationale Situationiste#6 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1961) 2-4.

experience reality as second-hand. Everything has been seen and done before. . .adventure [is] dead”¹²⁵. Eventually, the S. I.’s expansion of Lefebvre’s concept of everyday life would in turn influence him to embrace the belief that everyday life under capitalism was now totally colonized. For instance in 1975, Lefebvre stated that:

Monopoly capitalism has [now] replaced competitive capitalism; superstructure and base interpenetrated each other and lost their distinct outlines; old social classes [have] been transformed; new ideological structures and modes of alienation [have] arisen. . . [where] the old proletariat, no longer immediately revolutionary in any sense, [is] being progressively depoliticized. . .with new abundance of material goods, new scarcities-of space and of desire emerge. . .bearing new forms of alienation. . .[everywhere] the bureaucratic society . . .control[s] [production and] consumption.¹²⁶

Henri Lefebvre’s comments reiterated many of the same point that the S. I. and Debord made in The Society of the Spectacle. It is clear that the relationship between Lefebvre and the S. I. was reciprocal in the sense that each learned from the other’s work. Henri Lefebvre’s critique fueled the S. I.’s theory, while the S. I. supplied Lefebvre with theoretical expansions of his work and some practical methods for intervening in everyday life with “détournement”. As late as 1980, Henri Lefebvre referred to “détournement” or “détour” as the an essential aspect for subverting state-capitalism; “The abolition of labor. . .makes the greatest amount of sense. . .[but] the passage from labor to non-labor supposes . . . a difficult movement, which will not take place without *détours or reversals*”¹²⁷.

Another important example of the influence that Lefebvre had on the S. I. is his theory of

¹²⁵ Saddle Plant, The Most Radical Gesture: The S. I. in a Post-Modern Age (New York: Routledge, 1992) 10.

¹²⁶ Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 95.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

moments. According to Lefebvre, everyday life had to be studied in order to grasp and reproduce certain moments. For Lefebvre, moments are instances in an individual's daily life that transcend the trivialities of his or her everyday activities and arouse insights beyond empirical routines. For example, Lefebvre describes love as a moment that can inspire transcendental feelings in individuals:

"Love is a moment." By this I mean first the permanent temptation of the absolute. Love tends towards the absolute; if not it does not exist. However, the absolute is impossible, unlivable, untenable . . . [Hence] it slyly seizes, takes hold of you. . . and you use cunning with it to retake yourself. . . the moment of love is situated at the intersection of the impossible absolute and of the everyday. . . It is a moment lived in the mode of contradiction.¹²⁸

Moments such as love, according to Lefebvre, inspire feelings of transcendence. These types of feeling punctuated the everyday boredoms in people's lives. If everyday life was to be reorganized and transformed, these types of moments would have to be maximized and harnessed towards revolutionizing everyday life. According to Lefebvre, "let everyday life become a work of art! Let every technical means be employed for the transformation of everyday life!"¹²⁹. Similarly, the early Situationist International picked up on Lefebvre theory of moments stating that moments were genuine instances of real life. Raoul Vaneigem stated that:

Who can gauge the striking power of an impassioned daydream, the pleasure taken in love, of a nascent desire, of a rush of sympathy? Everyone seeks spontaneously to extend such brief moments of real life; everyone wants basically to make something out of their

¹²⁸ Ibid, 62.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 89.

everyday life.¹³⁰

For the S. I., the primary aim of any social revolution was to extend these brief moments of real life. However, expanding on Lefebvre's theory of moments, the S. I. argued that moments had to be extended into situations that would inevitably cause ruptures in the routine of everyday life. In 1960, the S. I. stated that only "moments constructed as 'situations' can be considered moments of rupture, of acceleration, revolutions in individual everyday life"¹³¹. Subsequently, with the expansion of moments, both Lefebvre and the S. I. turned to "spontaneous revolution" or the "festive revolution" as a situation that would maximize and extend transcendental moments. Lefebvre and the S. I. collaborated on a study of the 1871 Paris commune as a historical example of a "festive/spontaneous revolution" that could maximize transcendental moments.

According to them, the Paris commune was a "spontaneous/festive revolution". It was a situation of ecstasy that was autonomously experienced by all participants. Lefebvre and the S. I. believed that the Paris commune was an example of an authentic community where every individual was autonomous, in control of their own lives, history. It was a community filled with "revolutionary fervor [amidst]. . . demonstrations, riots and mass occupations"¹³². This "festive/spontaneous revolution", they stated, was based on play and autonomy. People did not follow any designated party, but instead focused on community and on extending the revolution. The commune "created a city free of planning, a field of moments, visible and loud, the antithesis

¹³⁰ Ibid. 76.

¹³¹ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 146.

¹³² Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 103.

of planning: a city that was reduced to zero and then reinvented everyday”¹³³. I will return to this concept in the next chapter, since it is crucial to the events of May 68.

Despite their collaborations on the ideas of spontaneous/festive revolution, Lefebvre and the S. I. would eventually part ways. In 1962, shortly after completing their study on the Paris commune and publishing separate articles on the topic, the S. I. attacked Lefebvre for plagiarism. The S. I. claimed Lefebvre had stolen the idea of festive/spontaneous revolution from them. Of course, this was not the case as Lefebvre had been using the concept of the “spontaneous/festive revolution” since his days as a Surrealist, “we [i.e. Surrealists] thought of the revolution as a never-ending popular festival. From 1925, we wrote many things about the end of work. At this time, we saw that transformation of work as the revolutionary stake”¹³⁴. Oddly, the S. I. usually championed plagiarism; “plagiarism is necessary, progress implies it”¹³⁵, so it is unusual that the group would attack one of its members on such grounds. However, the primary factor for the break in their relationship was most likely caused by the fact that the S. I. was becoming more radical and politicized. It was ruthlessly purging itself of artists and theorists who were not as extreme, which consequently meant Lefebvre.

Debord personally attacked Henri Lefebvre’s critique for not being radical enough. He claimed Lefebvre’s theory of moments was “too abstract”¹³⁶, and should be referred to as “the

¹³³ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 147.

¹³⁴ Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 97.

¹³⁵ Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, “A User’s Guide to Détournement,” Les Lèvres Nues#8 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1956) 2.

¹³⁶ Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 104.

science fiction of revolutionary thought”¹³⁷. Debord also criticized Lefebvre for romanticizing the revolution of everyday life. He stated that for Lefebvre, “the subversion of society. . . was a utopian question”¹³⁸ when it instead needed to be “a practical question of the highest order”¹³⁹. Finally, Debord criticized Lefebvre for basing the revolution of everyday life strictly on cultural practices. According to Debord, it was clear that only through direct political action would the revolution of everyday life succeed. The S. I. stated that:

The contestation of existing society in its entirety is the only criterion of an authentic liberation on the terrain of the city, this also goes for all other aspects of human activity [including art]. Otherwise “improvement” and [cultural] “progress” will always end up oiling the system to perfect the conditioning which we must overturn in urbanism and everywhere else.¹⁴⁰

As a result of the accusations, the S. I. cut its ties with Lefebvre and never associated with him again. Years later, Lefebvre would say that “without warning , times [had] changed, love [had] changed”¹⁴¹, our friendship was a love story that ended badly. But despite this, both Lefebvre and the S. I. had a powerful theoretical influence of each other as each supplied the other with theoretical insights.

In addition to his theoretical influences on everyday life, Lefebvre’s analysis of Marx also had a powerful impact on Debord and the Situationist International. Lefebvre’s claim that Marx’s theory was a dynamic philosophy that required continual revision because capitalism

¹³⁷ Ibid, 103.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 103.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 103.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 105.

¹⁴¹ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 146.

expanded and intensified into new economic stages of development, inspired French theorists such as Debord to re-examine Marx's work. What Lefebvre did was to reestablish Marxist thought in France as a dynamic theory that needed to be built upon with every new capitalist phase. According to Lefebvre, Marx's analysis had to be conceptualized as work in progress and not as an ideology.

The significance of the work of Marx and Engels is still far from being clearly elucidated. Two obstacles have hindered a deeper elaboration of Marxist thought. Some take Marx's and Engels's texts literally--seeing each text in isolation, without link, without unity--rather than attempting to grasp and extend the evolution of the thought they contain. In this way certain Marxists have lost sight of its dynamic, living character. . . This is a doctrine about thought in movement and about movement in things, and they immobilize it.¹⁴²

In this respect, Lefebvre requested that theorists understand Marx as a work in progress that required readjustments as capitalism expanded and shifted across the globe. According to Lefebvre, capitalism was "at the heart. . . of the banal, trivial and repetitive quality of [everyday] life"¹⁴³ and any critique or revolution of everyday life would have to have an understanding of capitalism's evolution. For Lefebvre, only Marx's dialectical method offers a plausible process of understanding capitalism's expansions. He believed Marx's "dialectical method is an essential element of . . . all scientific thought. . . because the dialectical method contains and implies a scientific, philosophical and human content"¹⁴⁴. Through Marx's dialectical method:

¹⁴² Henri Lefebvre, The Critique of Everyday Life (London: Verso, 1947) 176.

¹⁴³ Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 66.

¹⁴⁴ Henri Lefebvre, The Critique of Everyday Life (London: Verso, 1947) 177.

philosophy ceases to be speculative and systematic; on the one hand it opens itself up to science, and on the other to the totality of human reality. . . [it is] linked to practical action as well as to knowledge and thus implying the effort to supersede all the limitations of life and thought.¹⁴⁵

For Lefebvre, Marx's dialectical method allows theorists to envision society in a holistic way and to comprehend capitalism's expansions. Consequently, he argued that the time had come to redefine Marx's analysis within the context of capitalism's new expansions following the Second-World-War. These post-war economic conditions, which manifest themselves in the sphere of everyday life, would reveal new aspects of living and new alienations. Lefebvre stated in 1947 that:

Now the time of rediscovered, reorganized unity is beginning, but at a higher level . . . Man, his thoughts and his reality have developed dialectically. [Only the] dialectical method, the expression of all real processes, controls, organizes and illuminates this complex of ideas and confers on it the rigor of concrete logic. . . Each new stage reveals new aspects of life. . . [and the] dialectical method excludes the possibility that there can be nothing more to say about the human or about any domain of human activity.¹⁴⁶

In The Critique of Everyday Life, Lefebvre does not venture into a new contemporary Marxist analysis of capital because the book was only an introduction to further volumes on the subject. Other theorists such as Debord took up his challenge. Debord's 1967 book, The Society of the Spectacle, which I will examine in the next chapter, did exactly this. It recontextualized and re-defined Marx's analysis within capitalism's post-war economic developments. Debord's book,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 178.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 180-182.

which exemplifies the S. I.'s most unitary critique of capitalism, reorganizes capitalism into a unity called the "spectacle". Following from Lefebvre's idea that Marx's philosophy should be viewed as a dynamic critique that requires continuous adjustment, Debord argues that capitalism has expanded into new stages of alienation and control such as the mass media and the mass consumption of image commodities. Consequently, Debord's socio-economic analysis and his critique of capitalism's new stage of development will be discussed in the next chapter, followed by his revolutionary project that calls for the total subversion of capitalism.

Conclusion

After bringing art into everyday life, the French section of the S. I. became increasingly politicized, expelling its artistic members, while increasingly focusing on a socio-economic critique of capitalism and directly encouraging political revolution. The S. I. influenced aesthetic debates by acknowledging that art was not a direct means to political revolution. As a result, the S. I. became akin to a revolutionary organization focused on organizing and creating dissent. The reorganized S. I. attempted to encourage political scandals and mass insurrection by publishing subversive critiques of capitalism and by encouraging student movements to organize themselves based on S. I. principles. One of its earliest successes was at the University of Strasbourg, where student activists elected to represent the student union took it upon themselves to disseminate the S. I.'s critique across Europe and allowed the S. I. to participate in their politics. This event provided wide publicity for the S. I. and made the movement widely known throughout France

and Europe. As a result, this event permitted the S. I. to play a prominent role in the events of May 68.

Secondly, the S. I.'s relationship with Henri Lefebvre gave the movement an important theoretical basis from which to develop its theory. Lefebvre's analysis of moments, everyday life, the revolution of everyday life and spontaneous/festive revolution enabled the S. I. to perfect its critique and radicalize its politics. In addition, Lefebvre's own theory benefited from his relationship with the Situationist International. The S. I. supplied him with new insights into his own concepts as each developed their individual critiques in reference to each other. Nonetheless, their reciprocal relationship would end under bad circumstances amidst accusations of plagiarism and harsh criticism. However, Lefebvre's influence on the movement was substantial. In many ways the Situationist International's analysis and critique of everyday life owes a lot to Lefebvre's early work, while at the same time, Lefebvre's later works benefited a great deal from the S. I.'s political actions and its radical theory. Nevertheless, before I examine the events of May 68, it is important that I discuss the S. I.'s unitary critique of capitalism, most clearly expressed by Guy Debord in his 1967 book The Society of the Spectacle. Hence, the next chapter will be completely dedicated to his critique. Primarily, I will examine Debord's theoretical relationship to Marx's, the Frankfurt School's and Lukács' analyses and secondly, in explaining Debord's theoretical position, I will periodically refer to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Jerry Rubin's idea of spontaneous/festive revolution and Hegel's dialectical method.

Chapter 3

The Theoretical roots of Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle and its relationship to Marx, Hegel, Lukács and the Frankfurt School

In his 1967 book titled, The Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord offers us an understanding of the contemporary effects of modern capitalism and its alienation. He argues that the contemporary effects of modern capitalism and alienation are inseparable from the rapidly changing image/information culture that has dominated the latter half of the 20th century. Debord's critique of this new image/information culture is a redefinition of Karl Marx's analysis of production and alienated labor and Hegel's notion of the "absolute"¹⁴⁷ (more will be said on this later). Debord takes Marx's critique and redefines it, emphasizing the importance of social reproduction, mass consumption and the mass media in Post-World-War II society due to the fact that he believes that this is now capitalism's new stage of development. For Debord, alienation has now grown to such an extent that every aspect of an individual's social life is completely alienated, commodified and objectified.

Commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of commodity. . . stratum after stratum of commodities. . . alienated consumption has been added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of. . . a fragmentary individual completely cut off from the concerted action of the forces of production.¹⁴⁸

According to Debord, people are now alienated consumers in addition to being alienated laborers,

¹⁴⁷ Martyn Oliver, The History of Philosophy (England: Prospero Books, 1997) 120.

¹⁴⁸ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 29.

and they are now completely dominated by the objects they produce. Nonetheless, Debord's diagnosis does not fully divulge how this all-encompassing alienation has emerged. Hence further theoretical explanations are required.

Therefore, I will begin by discussing the theoretical roots of Debord's socio-economic critique, arguing that Debord's ideas have their origins in the ideas expressed by Hegel, Karl Marx and Lukács, while also demonstrating similarities to the Frankfurt School's critique. Secondly, I will show that Debord's critique and his notion of the spectacle have transformed debates on capitalism, power, mass communication and everyday life by arguing, similar to the Frankfurt School, that capitalism has intensified and expanded to such an extent that its images/object commodities dominate all social relationships. Thirdly, I will theoretically criticize Debord's idea of an all-encompassing spectacle, arguing that if the spectacle consumes everything and everyone, how is the revolution of everyday life supposed to occur? In answering this question, I will refer to Antonio Gramsci's theory of "hegemony" and Marx's analysis of labor and capital, arguing that Gramsci and Marx offer an explanation beyond the spectacle's domination. Finally, I will outline Debord's revolutionary project and demonstrate its similarities and its differences to Marx's own revolutionary project.

Nonetheless, before I begin my analysis, it is important that I mention certain historical details. It is crucial to understand that Guy Debord and the Situationist International were unaware of the Frankfurt School's critique due to the fact that their famous book, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, was not translated into French and was not widely published until 1969. For example, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno state in the preface of the 1969 edition that "the

book made its reputation only by degrees, and . . . [was] out of print for a long time. We have decided to reissue it after more than twenty years”¹⁴⁹. I mention this because the Frankfurt School’s critique predates Debord’s analysis by 20 years and I do not want my readers to assume that Debord and the S. I. plagiarized their analysis. Although Debord and the S. I. were unaware of the Frankfurt School’s theory concerning a total administered world, I have included the Frankfurt School’s analysis because their analysis helps contextualize Debord’s own critique within an academic framework. I have also included the Frankfurt School’s analysis because their critique was echoed by various social movements throughout the 1960’s, which inadvertently included movements such as the Situationist International.

Additionally, it is important to briefly mention that Debord’s book identifies a model created by modern industry, the culture industry and the individual, where each shares in a dialectical relationship. Debord classifies this model and its effects as “the spectacle”. It is essential that I define what these terms mean; since they are important to my analysis in this chapter. Modern industry is a specific branch of production designated for mass producing physical products for commercial enterprise such as cars, toys, shoes and clothing etc. According to Marx, modern industry is defined as “machinery organized in a system”¹⁵⁰ for the purpose of mass producing objects/products. Although the culture industry is a branch of modern industry, it is classified separately because it produces mental products such as information, images, ideas,

¹⁴⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) xi.

¹⁵⁰ Karl Marx, “Capital (Volume One),” The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1978) 407.

concepts etc. rather than physical goods. Hence, I define culture industry as a specific branch of production designated for mass producing mental products. The individual should be understood as the universal and generalized concept of the human being belonging to the human species, regardless of race, gender and age.

Hegel, Marx, Debord and the Frankfurt School

(Part 1)

Intrinsic to Marx, Debord and the Frankfurt School's theory is Hegel's dialectic. Hegel's complex philosophical system begins with his refuting the idea that the world is made up of separate isolated things or facts. According to Hegel, only after facts or things are related together as a whole, which Hegel calls the "absolute", can one speak of rationality; to understand things-in-themselves is impossible. Hence, Hegel developed a dialectical theory which attempted to understand things as interconnected. Hegel's dialectic starts with the idea that:

there are three aspects in every thought which is logically real or true: the abstract or rational form, which says what something is; the dialectical negation, which says what something is not; the speculative concrete comprehension: A is also which it is not, A is non-A. . . Every concept is rational, is abstractly opposed to another, and is united in comprehension with its opposites.¹⁵¹

For Hegel, the totality of a thing cannot be explained without referring to its relation to something

¹⁵¹ G.W.F. Hegel, "Encyclopaedie Der Philosophischen Wissenschaften," The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, ed. Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964) 13.

outside it. For example, we cannot completely explain an object without also explaining its functions and therefore its relation to other objects. This method of understanding is crucial to Marx, Debord and the Frankfurt School's critique of modern society in the sense that their theories organize social reality within dialectical relationships. For example, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's method of analysis in their book Dialectic of Enlightenment is based, as their title suggests, on dialectical relationships. Their main argument is grounded in an analysis of the Enlightenment, where they see myth and the Enlightenment locked in a dialectical relationship.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, myth, which was the initial state of human knowledge, gave rise to its dialectical opposite, Enlightenment. In turn the Enlightenment tries to eradicate itself and the world of its antithesis, myth, since it understands it as illogical superstition. But, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, no matter how hard Enlightenment tries to eradicate myth, it cannot because myth is in a dialectical relationship with it. Therefore, the more Enlightenment fights to eradicate myth, the more it becomes radicalized, since it is itself a myth. For the Enlightenment:

matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent [mythical] powers. . . For Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect. . . [Formal logic] provides the Enlightenment thinkers with the schema of the calculability of the world [and its] demythologization. . . Every spiritual resistance it encounters serves merely to increase its strength. . . [However] the Enlightenment [has] lost itself in its positivistic aspect [exchanging] freedom for the pursuit of self-preservation.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 6-7.

Horkheimer and Adorno's theoretical foundation is based on the dialectical relationships between the Enlightenment and myth. In this respect, their analysis of Enlightenment is buttressed by Hegel's dialectical method. Consequently, this aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's analytical method is similar to Marx and Debord who also use a dialectical method of understanding.

However, this is to the extent that Debord, Marx and the Frankfurt School are connected to Hegel. Contrary to Hegel's application of dialectic to concepts, Marx, Debord and the Frankfurt School use dialectic to analyze the relationships created by the material conditions of society. For example, Marx's theory while using Hegel's dialectical method of analysis, is directly opposite of Hegel's due to the fact that Marx does not subscribe to Hegel's idea that reality is derived from mental cognition. For instance, Marx states in Capital that:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. . . To Hegel. . . the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the idea." With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. . . The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head [and] must be turned right side up again.¹⁵³

Hence, contrary to Hegel's claim that "the real is the rational and the rational is the real"¹⁵⁴, meaning that everything real is the generation of concepts and vice versa, Marx argues that reality is founded on the actual material conditions that humans physically create. For him, reality and thought are physical manifestations of human labor. This crucial difference between Hegel, Marx,

¹⁵³ Karl Marx, "Capital (Volume One)," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1978) 301-302.

¹⁵⁴ Martyn Oliver, The History of Philosophy (Great Britain: Prospero Books, 1997) 120.

Debord and the Frankfurt School prompted Marx to criticize Hegel's theory "as a piece of mystification"¹⁵⁵. Contrary to Hegel, Marx claims that theory is not proven through abstract thinking, but through practice:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is purely a scholastic question.¹⁵⁶

Consequently, following Marx's inversion of Hegel's dialectical method, Debord and the Frankfurt School's critique assume that ideas derive from material conditions and that a critique must be first and foremost practical. For example, Horkheimer and Adorno state that one of the objectives of their book, Dialectic of Enlightenment, was to find practical solutions, where "ways of applying [the book]. . . are to be sought"¹⁵⁷. The Frankfurt School's program was an attempt to merge philosophy with practice in order to develop a new approach to the study of human experience that synthesized the practical concerns of the social sciences with the abstract concerns of philosophy.

Nonetheless, Hegel is so convinced that reality is generated by concepts, that he argues that at its pinnacle this truth is constituted in a singular whole. For Hegel, you cannot speak of particular concepts which represent reality without also referring to the whole. Marx rejects this

¹⁵⁵ Karl Marx, "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 18.

¹⁵⁶ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 144.

¹⁵⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 242.

claim arguing that this idea of the “absolute concept” is an illusion. It is:

egoism raised in its pure abstraction to the level of thought. . .as alienated human self-consciousness. . .With him the negation of the negation is the confirmation of the pseudo-essence [i.e. the absolute concept]. . .as an objective being dwelling outside man and independent of him.¹⁵⁸

Marx argues that Hegel brings thought, the alienation of mental labor, to its final conclusion which is an absolute self-contained concept/truth. According to Marx, Hegel forgets that alienated mental labor is grounded in alienated physical labor represented by the material conditions within which humans live and work. However, this is where Debord and the Frankfurt School diverge from Marx’s attack on Hegel’s notion of the “absolute”. In fact, Debord and the Frankfurt School reintroduce Hegel’s idea of an “absolute” within Marx’s conception of “historical materialism”. They reconstitute Marx’s conception of “historical materialism”, the belief that history is guided by the material conditions within which humans live and labor, into a singular abstract whole. In effect, they reapply Hegel’s idea of the “absolute” to the Marxist foundation that stipulates that human productivity is the origin of history, relationships, thought and community.

For example, Debord’s idea of the “the spectacle” and the Frankfurt School’s idea of the “totally administered society” are similar to Hegel’s conception of the “absolute” through the idea that all the relations, differences and oppositions between concepts (in Debord’s case “spectacular relationships”) are contained in one interrelated abstract unity. For Hegel, Debord, and the

¹⁵⁸ Karl Marx, The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, ed. Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964) 185.

Frankfurt School, this unity is all-encompassing. As Hegel states; “wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, the dialectic [i.e. the spectacle] is at work”¹⁵⁹. What allows Debord and the Frankfurt School to reestablish Hegel’s concept of “the absolute”, as embodied in the “spectacle”, is that it is based on Marx’s notion of alienated physical labor which has been externalized and objectified to such an extreme that it becomes all-encompassing, dominating every aspect of reality.

According to the Frankfurt School, with the absolute power of capitalism realized, “technical and social tendencies, always interwoven, converge in the total schematization of men. . . [and] the instruments of domination encompass all”¹⁶⁰. Nonetheless, although Debord and the Frankfurt School share a similar notion of a totally administered society, the Frankfurt School does not offer a solution to this oppressive dialectical force, while Debord does. Debord expands on the Frankfurt School by offering a practical solution for overthrowing this all-encompassing dialectical force through the use of “détournement” and proletarian insurrection.

First and foremost, expanding Hegel’s dialectic, which according to Marx, only “glorif[ies] the existing state. . . [and] bourgeoisdom. . . [through] an affirmative recognition [that]. . . every historically developed social form is [a] fluid movement [towards higher levels of freedom]”¹⁶¹, Debord envisions the subversion of Hegel’s affirmative dialectic and the existing oppressive society through a proletarian political revolution and the use of “détournement”.

¹⁵⁹ Martyn Oliver, *The History of Philosophy* (Great Britain: Prospero Books, 1997) 121.

¹⁶⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 35-35.

¹⁶¹ Karl Marx, “Capital (Volume One),” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 302.

Similar to Marx's notion that within Hegel's "affirmative recognition of the existing state of things. . .[is] also, the recognition of the negation of that state"¹⁶², Debord argues that capitalist society and Hegel's "dialectical theory . . .includes in its positive use. . . a simultaneous recognition of . . . [its] inevitable destruction"¹⁶³. Consequently, for Marx and Debord, the proletariat is the political antithesis of bourgeois capitalism and the negative embodiment of Hegel's positive dialectic given that it is the only class that "embodies. . .[all] the negative results of capitalist society"¹⁶⁴. Hence, according to Marx and Debord, only it can totally "reverse . . . established [dialectical] relationships"¹⁶⁵ and subvert the capitalist system¹⁶⁶ (more will be said on this later).

Nevertheless, expanding on Marx's notion that the proletariat is the political antithesis of bourgeois capitalism and the embodiment of Hegel's negative dialectic, Debord argues that "détournement" is also the antithesis of bourgeois capitalism and the practical embodiment of "the negative spirit [that Hegel's dialectic] contains"¹⁶⁷. According to Debord, "détournement" is the negative practical force of Hegel's positive dialectic and it is a practical method capable of eliminating the alienating manifestations of capitalist ideology within culture, politics and the economy:

¹⁶² Ibid, 302.

¹⁶³ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 144.

¹⁶⁴ Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 65.

¹⁶⁵ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 144.

¹⁶⁶ Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 64.

¹⁶⁷ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 144.

Détournement. . . is the fluid language of anti-ideology. . . the violence of détournement. . mobilizes an action capable of disturbing or overthrowing an existing order. . . Only the real negation of culture can inherit culture's meaning. It is this unified theoretical critique that goes alone to its rendezvous with a unified social practice.¹⁶⁸

For this reason, according to Debord, the practice of “détournement” is able to subvert capitalism's manifestations (see image 5). As a result, Debord's idea of “détournement” expands on Marx's proletarian revolution by attempting to practically encourage political revolution. For Debord, “détournement” practically negates bourgeois capitalism; it “erases false [capitalist] ideas [and] replaces them with correct ideas. . . [as] détournement is the antithesis of . . . theoretical [bourgeois] authority”¹⁶⁹.

Debord's “détournement” expands on the Frankfurt School, by outlining a practical method for subversion, where individuals are encouraged to play with their environment, subverting capitalist objects, images and hegemony into opposite forms, and in the process, reclaiming their alienated labor away from capital. Hence, Debord's “détournement” expands on the Frankfurt School by specifically outlining a practical strategy. Nonetheless, despite Debord's practical efforts to subvert capitalist manifestations, there are contradictions in his theoretical position. How can proletarian revolution, cultural revolution or any other type of critical response occur if society is totally administered and dominated by an all-encompassing dialectical force? (more will be said on this later)

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 146-147.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 145.

Having outlined Debord, Marx and the Frankfurt School's theoretical relationship to Hegel, I will now discuss in detail Debord's model, the relationship between modern industry, the culture industry and the individual. I will begin by examining the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the individual; secondly, the relationship between modern industry and the culture industry, and thirdly, the relationship between the culture industry and the individual. In the process of my examination, I will outline some of Debord's conclusions concerning the effects of these relationships, ending with his idea for proletarian revolution. My analysis will compare Debord's model with Marx's and the Frankfurt School's analysis, displaying both how Debord's theory relates to and expands on both their theories.

Modern Industry and the Individual

In The Society of the Spectacle, Debord argues that the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the individual is one where industry is increasingly exploiting the individual through division of labor. With the advent of the spectacle, the individual is now completely mediated by mass production. Individuals are now dependent on selling their labor to modern industry at increasingly cheaper prices in order to sustain their existence. Nonetheless, according to Debord, this relationship is not new and is in fact "the primitive stage of capitalist accumulation [where] 'political economy treats the proletarian as a mere worker' who must

receive only the minimum necessary to guarantee his labor-power”¹⁷⁰. Hence, in this part, I will discuss Debord’s argument concerning modern industry and the individual, relating it to Marx’s analysis and Georg Lukács’ book, History and Class Consciousness. Secondly, I will discuss Debord’s all-encompassing “spectacle”, which he argues developed from the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the individual.

According to Debord, Marx, and Lukács, labor is the basis of society and history. For example, Debord states that “the spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social reality. . .the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself the product of real activity”¹⁷¹. Similarly, Marx comprehends human activity as revolutionizing activity:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that . . . changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances. . . human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice.¹⁷²

For Marx, Lukács, and Debord, it is humans who alter their environment. The more humans alter their environments through their labor the more they alter themselves and their social relations. Out of this revolutionizing labor process develops the division of labor. According to Lukács, the division of labor arises only when production exceeds the measure of consumption and achieves a level where it can have a social influence on others:

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 30.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 14.

¹⁷² Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 144.

Production, in its entire organization, aims at the creation of use-values and not exchange values, and it is only when their supply exceeds the measure of consumption that use-values cease to be use-values, and become means of exchange, i.e., commodities. . . [This] is when commodities have [an] impact on the . . . structure of society.¹⁷³

The impact of commodities is that increasing division of labor results in the individual progressively being conceived as a worker. According to Marx, with the onset of modern industry “it is only as a worker that he [the individual] continues to maintain himself as a physical subject”¹⁷⁴. In this respect, under capitalism and modern industry, an individual’s identity and survival is dependent on him or her selling his labor-power. This needs further explanation given that alienated or divided labor is crucial to both this revolutionizing process and the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the individual.

This concept of divided labor originated with Marx who argued that once a surplus-value has been attained, capital is born and able to exert an influence on an individual’s labor-power. According to Marx,

capital is. . . governing power over labor and its product. The capitalist possesses this power, not on account of his personal or human qualities, but inasmuch as he is an owner of capital. His power is the purchasing power of his capital, which nothing can withstand. . . [as] Capital is stored-up labor”¹⁷⁵.

Secondly for Marx, in an effort to increase capital’s governing power, capitalists resort to

¹⁷³ Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1968) 85.

¹⁷⁴ Karl Marx, The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, ed. Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964) 109.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 78.

increasing the division of labor in an effort to maximize profits or stored-up labor. According to Marx, one method of intensifying the division of labor is through new productive forces “each new productive force, insofar as it is not merely a quantitative extension of productive forces already known (for instance the bringing into cultivation of fresh land), causes a further development of the division of labor”¹⁷⁶. Hence, in this respect, according to Marx, Lukács, and Debord, labor creates an independent force (i.e. capital) that increasingly governs and divides the individual. For example, Debord states that:

Workers do not produce themselves: they produce a force independent of themselves. The success of this production, that is, the abundance it generates, is experienced by its producers only as an abundance of dispossession. All time, all space, becomes foreign to them as their own alienated products accumulate.¹⁷⁷

An important aspect of this independent force is that the accumulation of capital and increasing divisions of labor constantly revolutionizes social conditions creating new stages of development.

Marx states that:

the various stages of development in the division of labor are just so many different forms of ownership, i.e., the existing stage in the division of labor determines also the relations of individuals to one another with reference to the material, instrument, and product of labor.¹⁷⁸

As divisions of labor and capital increases and changes, new forms of private property emerge

¹⁷⁶ Karl Marx, “German Ideology,” The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 150.

¹⁷⁷ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 23.

¹⁷⁸ Karl Marx, “German Ideology,” The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 150-151.

which realign and change individual relationships. However, for Lukács, Marx and Debord, with every new stage of capitalist development the individual is increasingly exploited and alienated by modern industry. For example Debord states that “though separated from his product (i.e. his labor) man is more and more, and more powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world. The closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically is he cut off from that life”¹⁷⁹. Similar to Debord, Lukács argues that the history of labor is marked by increasing rationalization and the oppression of individual attributes of workers.

If we follow the path taken by labor in its development. . .we can see a continuous trend towards greater rationalization, the progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker. . .[as] the process of labor is progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialized operations. . .the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a specialized set of actions.¹⁸⁰

Hence analogous to Marx and Lukács’ analysis of division of labor, Debord argues that the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the individual is based on division of labor where modern industry increasingly intensifies the division of labor in order to exploit a greater portion of an individual’s labor-power:

At the root of the spectacle lies that oldest of all divisions of labor, the specialization of power. . .Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle. . . what it is, namely, hierarchical power evolving on its own, in its separateness, thanks to an increasing productivity based on an ever more refined division of labor, ever greater

¹⁷⁹ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 24.

¹⁸⁰ Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. press, 1968) 88.

[developments] of machine-governed gestures, and an ever-widening market.¹⁸¹

From this perspective all three theorists argue that although the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the individual is based on human labor, modern industry is nevertheless, exploiting and oppressing the individual through increasing division of labor.

According to Marx, the effect of the division of labor is that individuals become all the more poorer the more they produce because they become increasingly alienated from what they produce and increasingly dominated by what they produce. This is due to the fact that the product of their labor, which they receive a monetary value for, does not belong to them. Hence, Marx states:

The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men. Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity-and this in the same general proportion in which it produces commodities.¹⁸²

Increasing production forces and increasing divisions of labor result in greater and greater alienation and detachment for individuals, to the point where individuals lose all autonomy, “the more powerful labor becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker”¹⁸³. Similar to Marx, Lukács states that modern industry creates circumstances where:

¹⁸¹ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 19-21.

¹⁸² Karl Marx, The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, ed. Dirk J Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964) 107.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* 109.

man's own activity, his own labor becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man. . . Objectively a world of objects and relations between things springs into being. . . confront[ing] him [the individual] as invisible forces that generate their own power. . . Subjectively-where the market has been fully developed-a man's activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity subject to. . . go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article"¹⁸⁴.

This essential relationship between modern industry and the individual is one where individuals are increasingly rationalized and oppressed through the division of labor. According to Lukács, with the development of the capitalist industrial system the division of labor exists "both as the presupposition and the product of capitalist production"¹⁸⁵. Finally, similar to Lukács and Marx, Debord states that increasing exploitation and divisions of labor results in universal proletarianization:

As the accumulation of alienated products proceeds, and as the productive process gets more concentrated, consistency and communication become the exclusive assets of the system's managers. The triumph of an economic system founded on separation leads to the proletarianization of the world.¹⁸⁶

Inherent in Debord's statement is Lukács and Marx's analysis which stipulates that with increasing division of labor, the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the individual becomes increasingly the exploitation of the individual. Individuals and the external world are increasingly becoming capital and private property argues Marx, as these are "the

¹⁸⁴ Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1968) 87.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 87.

¹⁸⁶ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 21.

product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labor”¹⁸⁷.

Nonetheless, expanding on Lukács and Marx, Debord takes their notion of economic development and division of labor and pushes it to its ultimate conclusion called the “spectacle”. In his analysis, Debord argues that the spectacle is a final all-encompassing stage of economic development between modern industry and the individual, where “commodities are all that there is to see”¹⁸⁸ and where individual relationships are completely mediated. It is important to note here that Debord’s notion of the “spectacle” begins with Lukács statement that the “commodity [system] can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it . . . [is] the universal category of society as a whole”¹⁸⁹. Similar to Lukács, Debord conceives of the “spectacle” as a unity. However expanding on Lukács and Marx, Debord declares that the “spectacle” is the final stage of capitalist industrial development, where all social relationships within contemporary society have succumbed to capitalism’s tyranny and “all that was once directly lived has become mere representation”¹⁹⁰. Debord also expands on Marx and Lukács by arguing that the relationship between modern industry and the individual has brought forth a state where “capital [has] accumulated to the point where it becomes images”¹⁹¹. According to Debord, the spectacle is not only a social relationship between people mediated by objects and modern industry, but also “a

¹⁸⁷ Karl Marx, The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, ed. Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964) 117.

¹⁸⁸ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 29.

¹⁸⁹ Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1968) 86.

¹⁹⁰ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 12.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

social relationship between people that is mediated by images”¹⁹². Hence, Debord’s “spectacle” is this all-encompassing pervasive force that completely mediates all social relationships, both mental and physical.

Furthermore, Debord argues that while this final stage of development can be conceived as a unity, its mode of operation is dynamic. The spectacle is dynamic in the sense that it is constantly re-adjusting itself: “the spectacle is founded on change, and must change as that foundation changes. . . Though quintessentially dogmatic, [it] can yet produce no solid dogma. Nothing is stable for it. . . this is its natural state”¹⁹³. Debord’s “spectacle” is a stage that is ever-changing in order to accommodate the new relationships that develop within the context of its dominion. Within this formation:

The spectacle is associated with the abundance of commodities, with the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here each commodity. . . [jostles] for position on the stage of the affluent economy. . . However. . . different star commodities simultaneously promote conflicting approaches to the organization of society. . . Each individual commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others and aspires to impose its presence everywhere as though it were alone.¹⁹⁴

Despite stating that the spectacle envelops every section of the globe, Debord does outline two different types of all-encompassing spectacles. The first formation, which I discuss above, is what Debord refers to as “the diffused spectacle”. This type of spectacle is associated with western nations and western styles of economic organization. However, despite acknowledging that the

¹⁹² Ibid, 12.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 26.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 42-43.

“diffuse spectacle” is the highest spectacular formation, Debord outlines another less perfected spectacle, the “concentrated spectacle”. For Debord, the “concentrated spectacle” is characterized by a centralized government and economy. In this formation, found in the so-called socialist countries:

the spectacle. . . characterizes bureaucratic capitalism. . . Bureaucratic property is itself concentrated, in that the individual bureaucrat’s relation to the ownership of the economy as a whole is invariably mediated by the community of bureaucrats. . . And commodity production, less well developed in bureaucratic systems, is also concentrated in form. . . the dictatorship of the bureaucratic economy cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice because it has had to make all the choices itself.¹⁹⁵

The primary difference between the two forms of spectacles is that the “diffuse spectacle” allows for an abundance of products to compete with each other in the market through private ownership, and a variety of product choices. Conversely, the “concentrated spectacle” allows for no competition, no private ownership, and no product choices. Although they are different, Debord claims that the outcome of both spectacles is the same. No matter how much variety is available the domination of the “diffuse spectacle” is the same as the “concentrated spectacle”. Both represent the exploitation of labor, the accumulation of capital and the further development of the division of labor:

Something that can assert its own unchanging excellence with uncontested arrogance changes nonetheless. This is true of the concentrated as of the diffuse version of the spectacle, and only the system endures: Stalin, just like any obsolete product, can be cast aside by the very forces that promote his rise. . . The unreal unity the spectacle proclaims

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 41-42.

masks the class division on which real unity of the capitalist mode of production is based. . What pushes for greater rationality is also what nourishes the irrationality of hierarchical exploitation and repression.¹⁹⁶

Although Guy Debord is a Neo-Marxist, he does understand that the so-called communist economic systems are nothing more than a concentrated form of capitalism. The capitalist owners are the bureaucrats that exclusively control both the economic and political system in the name of the proletariat.

Having examined Debord's "spectacle" and the dialectical relationship between the modern industry and the individual that have brought forth this pervasive force, I will now look at the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the culture industry. Before I continue it is important that I clarify that the culture industry, although originating from the same dialectical relationship as the "spectacle", is just another division of labor within Debord's all-encompassing "spectacle".

Modern Industry and the Culture Industry

The second dialectical relationship within Debord's "spectacle" is that of modern industry and the culture industry. According to Debord, this dialectical relationship is based on the exploitation of the individual, where individual are now oppressed mentally in addition to physical oppression. Furthermore, with the advent of the culture industry's new division of labor,

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 46.

commodities are now both mental products and physical products. In order to exemplify this relationship within Debord's spectacle, I will refer to the Frankfurt School's analysis of the culture industry and examine the similarities and the differences between them and Debord. First, according to Debord, out of the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the individual, the culture industry has emerged as another division of labor based on accumulated capital:

The present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from having to appearing: all effective "having" must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d'être* from appearance. . . [The culture industry] is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.¹⁹⁷

At this stage of development, according to Debord, "the spectacle" has acquired immaterial features where immaterial objects are produced and consumed mentally. Like Debord, the Frankfurt school also states that the culture industry has its roots in modern industry: "[it] emerge[d] from the factory to invade society as a whole"¹⁹⁸. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that what the culture industry primarily produces is ideology "the culture industry's . . . business is . . . ideology"¹⁹⁹ or mental products that are consumed through its various entertainment industries.

The assembly-line character of the culture industry, the synthetic, planned method of turning out its [mental] products (factory-like not only in the studio but, more or less, in the compilation of cheap biographies, pseudo-documentary novels and hit songs) is very

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 16-24.

¹⁹⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 151.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 136-137.

suited to . . . manipulating men.²⁰⁰

However, both Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno state that these mental products are dialectically linked to their counter part, physical products. In fact according to Horkheimer and Adorno, this relationship's " motives are markedly economic"²⁰¹. For example Horkheimer and Adorno state that the culture industry's advertising, in conjunction with permeating the dominant ideology, performs "the social service of informing the buyer about the market. . . help[ing]. . . the efficient supplier dispose of his goods"²⁰². The effect is that alienated commodities are simultaneously object and image, perpetuating the ideology of consumerism. According to Debord, the culture industry propagates:

the principle of commodity fetishism, that domination of society by things whose qualities are "at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses". This principle is absolutely fulfilled in the spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time imposed themselves as eminently perceptible.²⁰³

Hence, from Debord's and the Frankfurt School's perspective, the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the culture industry is another division of labor, one where mass consumption of mental products is added to mass consumption of material products. For Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno, the primary task of the culture industry is to mobilize consumers for the abundance of products that are mass produced by modern industry. One of the methods by which

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 163.

²⁰¹ Ibid. 161.

²⁰² Ibid. 162.

²⁰³ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 26.

the culture industry does this is by infusing mass produced objects with the transcendental, abstract concepts that are embodied in a commodity's "brand/image". This "brand/image" represents a lifestyle or lived experience that is bestowed on a product or products through advertising, marketing and "brand logos". For Horkheimer and Adorno, brands are "abstract concepts [or] sales propaganda"²⁰⁴ which induce consumers to purchase goods because a "brand name on everybody's lips increase[s] sales in the era of the free market"²⁰⁵. Similarly for Debord, a brand is an abstract concept that has superceded the commodity's use-value:

The falling rate of use-value, which is a constant of the capitalist economy, gives rise to new forms of privation within the realm of augmented survival . . . The fact that, even in its most impoverished form (food, shelter), use-value has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival- that is the real basis for the general acceptance of illusion in the consumption of modern commodities. The real consumer thus becomes a consumer of illusion [i.e. an illusory concept/lifestyle]. The commodity's . . . [use-value] is this illusion.²⁰⁶

Use-value is now the transcendental qualities that the brand embodies in products. These transcendental qualities are devoid of utility/use-value, and now serve no purpose other than cultural. In this sense, use-value is now illusory. It promises prestige, vitality, romance, excitement and happiness to whomever possess it. But possession usually means purchasing the various objects that have been touched by its magic/logo. In accordance with Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno state that a product today has no inherent value, but through exchange

²⁰⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 147.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 165.

²⁰⁶ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 32.

and its social rating:

No object has an inherent value; it is valuable only to the extent that it can be exchanged. The use-value. . . , its mode of being, is [now] treated as a fetish, and the fetish, the [objects] social rating becomes its use-value--the only quality which is enjoyed.²⁰⁷

Consequently, according to Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno, the effect of the brand on goods is that this commodity becomes akin to a religious artifact, where this type of “capitalist production so confines them [i.e. consumer], body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered”²⁰⁸. To further clarify the effects of these new commodities on the consumer, Debord states that:

what this means for the consumer is an outpouring of religious zeal in honor of the commodity's sovereign freedom. Waves of enthusiasm for particular products, fueled and boosted by the communication media, are propagated with lighting speed. A film sparks a fashion craze, or a magazine launches a chain of clubs that in turn spins off a line of products. The sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass of commodities become more and more absurd [i.e. devoid of any use] absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right. . . In this way reified man proclaims his intimacy with the commodity. Following in the footsteps of the old religious fetishism, with its transported convulsionaries and miraculous cures.²⁰⁹

Hence, for Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno, the dialectical relationship between modern industry and the culture industry always serves the same purpose, to benefit economic growth and to

²⁰⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 158.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁰⁹ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 43-44.

exploit an individual's labor-power. For example, Horkheimer and Adorno state that:

this bloated pleasure apparatus adds no dignity to man's lives. The idea of "fully exploiting" available technical resources and the facilities for aesthetic mass consumption is part of the economic system which. . . perpetually cheats its consumers [and laborers] of it perpetually promises. . . all the spectacle consist of, is illusory.²¹⁰

From this perspective, the culture industry wholly serves the purpose of validating the existing order. It is as Horkheimer and Adorno state "the irrefutable prophet of the prevailing order"²¹¹. Consequently, under the domination of the modern industry and the culture industry, the individual is reduced to alienated consumption on top of alienated production. The spectacular products only conceal the unity of poverty as differing forms of a single alienation/commodity masquerade as freedom of choice. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this is the triumph of the culture industry's ideology where "freedom to choose. . . is always the same"²¹². Likewise Debord states that the spectacle's culture industry is "an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise"²¹³ where the objective of modern industry and the culture industry is always to subdue the individual to the prevailing model of social life:

understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant modes of production. . . In all its manifestations-news or propaganda, advertising or actual consumption of entertainment- the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. . . In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent

²¹⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 139.

²¹¹ *Ibid.* 147.

²¹² *Ibid.* 167.

²¹³ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 19.

presence of that justification, for it governs . . . all the time spent outside the production process itself.²¹⁴

According to Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno, this dialectical relationship between modern industry and the culture industry, which is also embodied in their products, results now in the individual being an alienated consumers in addition to being alienated producers. The individual is now constantly at work either producing material goods within modern industry or consuming the immaterial goods of culture industry at home. For example, as Horkheimer and Adorno state; “leisure . . . is [now] akin to work”²¹⁵. Nonetheless, this aspect between the culture industry and the individual needs further explanation. Hence, let’s examine the dialectical relationship between the culture industry and the individual more closely.

Culture Industry and the Individual

The relationship between the culture industry and the individual expresses new forms of alienation that supercede Marx’s analysis. Debord’s critique develops on Marx’s analysis by arguing, as did the Frankfurt School, that capitalism has intensified and expanded to such an extent that new social conditions have developed which completely dominate the individual. The first of these new social conditions is that out of Marx’s idea of mass production arises the new social conditions of mass consumption. Secondly, that in addition to alienated labor there is now

²¹⁴ Ibid, 12-13.

²¹⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 127.

alienated consumption, and finally, that object commodities have developed a new dimension, the brand image. Although, I have already covered some of these aspects of Debord's "spectacle", it is important to further discuss these social conditions in relation to Frankfurt School's critique and its ideas concerning the effects of capitalism's new developments. In fact, both Debord and the Frankfurt School argue that the effects of this stage of industrial development are the commodification of culture, the commodification of the self, the destruction of city spaces, the creation of new planned environments and ultimately the creation of a pseudo-reality that completely dominates humans through industry and the mass media. Each of these new cultural and economic aspects have transformed debates on capitalism, power, mass communication, everyday life and power.

It is important to reiterate that these new forms of alienation coincide with the growth of the culture industry, where for Debord and the Frankfurt school the real world has slowly vanished into obscurity by continuously being ratified in the culture industry. For example, Debord states that because of the culture industry's ratification process:

the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings- tangible figments which are the efficient motor of trancelike behavior. . . [The culture industry]'s job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen via different specialized mediations. . . The spectacle's [culture industry] is the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence. . . the administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such "instant" communication.²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 17-19.

From Debord's perspective the dialectical relationship between the culture industry and the individual is one where the culture industry mediates every aspects of an individual's social relationships in order that the individual may be controlled and commercially exploited. Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno state that the culture industry completely mediates reality:

The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. . . The more intensely and flawlessly. . . techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is . . . for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen.²¹⁷

Within this stage of economic and social development, the culture industry impresses on the individual a new alienation, that of the consumer. According to Debord, "just as soon as so great an abundance of commodities begin to be produced. . . All of a sudden workers. . . [are] subject to the total contempt . . . [of physical] work . . . [and] their new roles as consumers"²¹⁸.

Consequently, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry occupies "men's senses from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in again the next morning with matter that bears the impress of the labor process"²¹⁹. Hence as consumers, individuals must laboriously consume both the products and the images produced by modern industry and the culture industry.

As a result, the individual is reduced to a spectator/laborer by the culture industry where

²¹⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 126.

²¹⁸ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 30.

²¹⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 131.

“communication is essentially one-way”²²⁰. The individual is dominated by the mass media in the sense that the individual is reduced to a passive observer, events and commodities are framed and analyzed for his own convenience. For example, Horkheimer and Adorno state that within the culture industry “sustained thought is out of the question. . .[and] no scope is left for the imagination. . .the entertainment industry. . .[has] taught them [i.e. the individuals] what to expect; [and] they [now] react automatically”²²¹. All the individual must do is admire and consume the many wonderful images/commodities the spectacle’s culture industry displays for his or her own supposed enjoyment. According to Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno, the result is that the individual’s social relationships become mediated by the culture industry’s images in the sense that these images come to replace lived experience. For instance, in describing this relationship between the culture industry and the individual Debord refers to Feuerbach’s assertion that:

for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence. . . illusion only is sacred. . . Nay the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.²²²

In this contemporary age of mass media, the individual learns to construct, comprehend his or her social reality through media. The media is in turn designed solely to reflect the dominant ideology. For Debord, the culture industry only projects “the image of blissful unification of society [which]

²²⁰ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 19.

²²¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 127.

²²² Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 11.

suspends disbelief with regards to the reality of division”²²³, and for Horkheimer and Adorno, this industry projects an “omnipresent authority”²²⁴. Consequently, Debord explains, the individual begins to understand and construct his or her identity through the object/images that the spectacular mediums display:

The spectator’s alienation from submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. . . [to the point where] the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him.²²⁵

An example is the media celebrity system, where individuals are meant to idolize these celebrities that are constructed by the media and in effect are “representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle’s banality into images of possible roles”²²⁶. These living commodities, paraded throughout the culture industry, display the correct styles of life that individuals are to mimic. According to Debord, media celebrities “mimic [the] by-products of. . . [social] labor, and project. . . power and leisure above [actual] labor so that they appear as its goal. The power to decide and the leisure to consume”²²⁷. Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the media star “with whom one is meant to fall in love is from the outset a copy. . . the

²²³ Ibid, 45.

²²⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 135.

²²⁵ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 23.

²²⁶ Ibid, 38.

²²⁷ Ibid, 39.

mechanical reproduction of beauty”²²⁸. They further argue that the culture industry and its media celebrities control language and gestures to the point where “innumerable people use words and expressions which they have either ceased to understand or employ only because they trigger off conditioned reflexes. . . Man. . . [is now] a proficient apparatus. . . served up by the culture industry”²²⁹. Finally, they suggest that what this culture industry does is sublimate the individual and manufacture pseudo-needs in him:

The power of the culture industry resides. . . with manufactured need. . . Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. . . what sinks in is the automatic succession of standardized operations. . . [which] continuously . . . break down. . . all individual resistance.²³⁰

Due to this constant sublimation through pseudo-needs, Debord argues that “boundless economic development [has] replaced the satisfaction of primary human needs, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs”²³¹. This continuous development of false needs, according to Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno, supplies modern industry with consumers that continuously need satisfaction. The result is that modern industry and culture industry intensify their control as the spectacle “true to its logical development continues [its] absolute domination”²³² and the individual becomes increasingly dependent on and dominated by the spectacle’s modern industry and its culture industry. According to the Frankfurt School, the main achievement of this totally

²²⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 140.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

²³¹ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 34.

²³² *Ibid.*, 121.

administered society is that “the masses are today [so] captivated by the myth of success. . . that they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them”²³³.

Debord argues that the effects of this “spectacle” and the Frankfurt School’s totally administered society is that culture disappears and becomes commodity, a “dead object to be contemplated in the spectacle”²³⁴. The spectacle consumes culture and turns it into itself. It turns it into spectacular images and spectacular commodities. Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno state that it is fruitless to speak of culture since under the tyranny of the culture industry; “culture is a . . . commodity [and] so completely is it subject to the law of exchange that it is . . . meaningless”²³⁵. According to Debord, in culture’s place the spectacle “becomes the locus of lost unity”²³⁶, the sphere where intellectual labor is focused in the form of contemplation.

Debord’s “spectacle” and the Frankfurt School’s totally administered society result in the death of the self. For Debord, “the spectacle erased the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed”²³⁷. And for Horkheimer and Adorno, “in the culture industry the individual is an illusion. . . individuals have ceased to be . . . and are now merely centers where . . . general tendencies meet”²³⁸. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, this is due to the fact that “the culture

²³³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 133-134.

²³⁴ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 132.

²³⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 161.

²³⁶ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 130.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

²³⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 154-155.

industry. . .subordinated [individuals] to one end and subsumed [them] under one false formula: the totality of the culture industry”²³⁹. Hence, for Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry erases the notion of self by falsifying reality to the point where images and reality merge so completely that divisions between self and the world, although still present, are imperceptible. According to Debord, this is false consciousness:

a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, or an “illusion of encounter”. In a society where no one is any longer recognizable by anyone else, each individual is. . . unable to recognize his own reality. . .here separation [i.e. the spectacle] has built its world.²⁴⁰

The viewer, led to believe that he or she is actually living, is only encountering a constructed illusion which takes the place of lived experience; “by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to this fate. The. . .consumption of commodities are at the core of this pseudo-response to a communication to which no response is possible”²⁴¹. Likewise Horkheimer and Adorno state that under the tyranny of the culture industry “a recommendation becomes an order. The recommendation of the same commodities under different propriety names”²⁴². Consequently, the individual lives less, constantly forced to consume the culture industry’s commodities. Therefore, the less the individual understands himself or herself, the more he or she identifies with the spectacular representations, whom he or she learns to mimic. As a

²³⁹ Ibid, 136.

²⁴⁰ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 152.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 153.

²⁴² Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 159.

result, the individual's gestures and thoughts are no-longer his or her own but extensions of the spectacle's domination. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the individual now embodies "the false identity of the general and the particular. . . [where] all . . . is identical"²⁴³. Hence, for Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno's perspective, the individual is completely objectified through alienated physical labor and alienated mental labor.

Another effect of Debord's spectacle is the development of "pseudo-cyclical time" which governs the individual. Pseudo-cyclical time is "a time transformed by industry. The time founded on commodity production. . . [and] the consumption of images"²⁴⁴. This concept of time is unnatural since it is tied to the maximization of commodity production and consumption. Its goal is not the improvement of human beings, but the improvement of the spectacle and the economy. For example, according to Debord, the time that communities supposedly focus on individuals such as celebrations and festivals masks the fact that this time is merely another form of commodity production and consumption:

Mass pseudo-festivals, with their travesty of dialogue and their parody of gifts, may incite people to excessive spending, but they produce only disillusion- which invariably in turn is offset by further false promises. . . The reality of time has been replaced by its publicity.²⁴⁵

In this respect, the individual is secondary to both commodity production time and commodity

²⁴³ Ibid, 121.

²⁴⁴ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 111-112.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 113.

consumption time; “commodity-time is everything, man is nothing”²⁴⁶. Similarly Horkheimer and Adorno argue that under these new social conditions “the ruthless unity of . . . industry is . . . the advancing rule of complete quantification. Everybody behaves [and labors] . . . in accordance with his . . . determined . . . indexed level”²⁴⁷. With labor time measured down to the second, the individual is reduced to a mere unit, a quantifiable variable in the whole production and consumption process.

Another important effect of the spectacle and the totally administered society is that modern industry and the culture industry, along with manipulating individuals, destroys city spaces for new “planned environments”. According to Debord, these environments are designed for the sole benefit of spectacular production and consumption:

The society eliminates geographical distance only to reap distance internally in the form of spectacular separation. . . Urbanism is the modern way of tackling the ongoing need to safeguard class power by ensuring the atomization of workers dangerously massed together. . . keeping order in the street. . . culminates in the suppression of the street [with the automobile]. The isolation of the population has become a much more effective means of control. Factories and cultural centers, holiday camps and housing developments-all are expressly oriented to the goal of a [planned] pseudo-community [where] the spectacle’s messages ensures. . . the dominant images.²⁴⁸

The old urban spaces are remodeled into shopping malls and acres of parking lots. This technical organization of consumption dissolves “the city to the point where it consumes itself”²⁴⁹. Likewise

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 110.

²⁴⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 123.

²⁴⁸ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 123.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 123.

Horkheimer and Adorno, argue that:

The huge gleaming towers that shoot up everywhere are outward signs of the ingenious planning of [the] entrepreneurial system. . . city housing projects designed to perpetuate the individual as supposedly independent units in a small hygienic dwelling make him all the more subservient to his adversary-the absolute power of capitalism. . . all the living units [i.e. individuals] crystallize into well-organized complexes.²⁵⁰

However, beside improving production and consumption, the re-organization of the city is done because the existing city poses a threat to continuation and expansion of capitalism. The reason, according to Debord, is that the old urban centers “embody at once a concentration of social power [i.e. centralized mass workers] . . . and a consciousness of the past”²⁵¹. Modern urbanism is a “way of tackling the need to safeguard class power by ensuring the atomization of workers dangerously massed together by conditions of urban production”²⁵². An example that Debord gives is “the dictatorship of the automobile. . . [that] has left its mark. . . [with] the dominance of freeways that bypass the old urban centers . . . [which] promotes ever greater dispersal”²⁵³. With the destruction of cities, modern urbanism institutes a “pseudo-countryside” devoid of natural and historic relationships:

The form of habitation and the spectacular control of today’s “planned environment” have created a new, artificial peasantry. The geographical dispersal and narrow-mindedness that always prevented the peasantry from undertaking independent action. . . The “new towns” of the technological pseudo-peasantry are the clearest of indications that. . . “on this spot

²⁵⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 120.

²⁵¹ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 125.

²⁵² *Ibid*, 121.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, 123.

nothing will ever happen- and nothing ever has".²⁵⁴

The destruction of cities facilitates the creation of a pseudo-reality called "the spectacle", where every aspect of an individual's life, including time and space, are reconstructed to maximize the domination of commodity production and consumption. Moreover, the creation of planned environments obliterates all signs of an alternative such as the possibility of organizing society differently. All that we see and must see in these new urban landscapes is the world of commodities.

These aspects of Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno's analyses have had a powerful influence on contemporary debates concerning the power of capitalism, the effects of urban life and the pervasiveness of our image/information culture. Their analyses argue that this domination is total. However, an important question arises from their individual analyses. How is Debord's analysis and the Frankfurt School's analysis of the totally administered society possible if every individual and thing has succumbed to the spectacle's domination. For their individual critiques to exist requires that a certain amount of labor escapes spectacular control. Hence, in the next part of this chapter, I will examine this question and argue that a response to the spectacle is possible because the spectacle needs to allocate some freedom to the individual in order to replenish itself and expand its dominion. To illustrate this point, I will refer to Antonio Gramsci's theory of "hegemony" and Marx's analysis of capital and labor. Where Marx argues that since labor is the

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 125-126.

active force that increases capital, capital can never fully absorb it. I will finish this part by discussing and comparing Marx and Debord's individual revolutionary projects. Before I begin, it is important that I mention that Debord and Marx's revolutionary projects are dependent on the idea that individuals have a certain extent of freedom from capitalism's domination because revolution requires that individuals are not continuously preoccupied in capital production.

A Critique of Debord's Notion of the All-Encompassing Spectacle

(Part 2)

According to Guy Debord and the Frankfurt School, capitalism has expanded and intensified to such an extent that it dominates every aspect of an individual's life. The effect of this domination is that our individual relationships are mediated by the spectacle/the totally administered society through its various manifestations. However if domination is total, how do their individual critiques escape this all-encompassing force? In discussing this question, I will refer to Horkheimer and Adorno's critique, Antonio Gramsci's theory of "hegemony" and Marx's analysis of capital and labor. First and foremost, under Horkheimer and Adorno's own theory, their own analysis would be classified as a "particular brand of deviation. . .[belonging] to capitalism. . .[and their] dissidence [would be labeled] the trademark of. . .a new idea in

business”²⁵⁵. Hence, from this viewpoint, Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis is self-defeating in the sense that by arguing that a response to capitalism is impossible, they negate their own critique. This same criticism applies to Debord who envisions a proletariat revolution, while arguing that the spectacle dominates everything and everyone.

Nonetheless, although Debord’s analysis does not acknowledge this contradiction, to a certain extent Horkheimer and Adorno are struggling with this aspect of their critique in their book, Dialectic of Enlightenment. For example, Horkheimer and Adorno state that “every progress made by civilization has renewed together with domination that prospect of its removal”²⁵⁶ and that “the rate at which they [i.e. individuals] are reduced to stupidity [is] the rate at which their intelligence is increasing”²⁵⁷. From this perspective, we can see that Horkheimer and Adorno want to empower individuals to reclaim their independence, while they realize that their critique may be too overwhelming to incite social change. Consequently, this contradiction leaves Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno’s individual critiques in a precarious position. However, Antonio Gramsci’s theory of “hegemony” and Marx’s analysis of capital and labor both offer ways out of this contradictory position, and an explanation why the critiques of Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno escape total domination.

According to Marx, the dialectical relationship between capital and labor is one where labor can never be totally dominated due to the fact that it is the active force that creates the

²⁵⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 132.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

social conditions that capital appropriates for itself. For example, Marx states in Grundrisse, that “capital does not create the objective conditions of labor. . . rather [it] buys the objective condition of labor. . . [created by] the living labor of the workers”²⁵⁸. Consequently, from Marx’s point of view, capital accumulation is based on the notion that labor must precede capital, since capital consumes or appropriates the aftermath of labor’s activity. Therefore, according to Marx, labor can never fully be dominated by capital since capital consumption requires labor production to have occurred prior to capital’s appropriation of it. Marx states that “living labor. . . [is] an activity which creates utility, use value, . . . [while] capital . . . [does] not. . . produce wealth, but the opposite, . . . [it] consumes [labor’s] wealth, . . . alien labor”²⁵⁹. Thus because living-labor produces, it must be given leeway by capital to produce. Clearly, Marx’s ideas concerning the capital/labor relationship and capital’s hold over labor needs further discussion.

First and foremost, according to Marx, through the consumption of alienated labor, capital increases its social power which is always directed at expanding the objective conditions for increasing its development. Marx states the basic condition for capital accumulation is that capital must have workers free of property other than their living-labor. As a result, Marx argues, capital appropriates property away from individuals in order to turn individuals into mere workers and control the material condition by which their living-labor creates. This capital appropriation for Marx maximizes capital growth and its survival:

²⁵⁸ Karl Marx, “Grundrisse,” The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 270-271.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 257.

Capital [starts with] the encounter, on one side, with free workers; and on the other side, with the necessities and materials etc., which previously were in one way or another the property of the masses who [because of capital appropriation] have now become object-less, and [thus] . . . purchasable.²⁶⁰

After capital has formed a market for itself, having appropriated property and having created a mass of property-less workers or free workers, capital becomes the mediator between the workers and his environment. According to Marx, capital's power derives from the fact that it controls the material conditions crucial to living-labor's (i.e. the workers) survival. In this respect, Marx states that capital sustains itself by governing over material conditions and living labor:

[Capital] wealth neither invented nor fabricated the spinning wheel or the loom. But, once unbounded from their land and soil [by capital appropriation] spinner and weaver with their stools and wheels came under the command of [capital] wealth. Capital proper does nothing but bring together the mass of hands and instruments which it finds on hand. It agglomerates them under its command. That is its real stockpiling.²⁶¹

Capital's governing power, which is exercised through the capitalist, originates from its mediating position between the material world and living labor. By wedging itself between the worker and his material conditions, capital is able to force the worker to labor on the conditions for capital accumulation. For Marx, what the worker creates is twofold; "one part. . . fulfils the conditions of his own existence. . . [which capital supplies to him or her after he or she] fulfils the [second part], the conditions for the existence of capital"²⁶².

Nevertheless, according to Marx, this process illustrates a crucial flaw in capital in the

²⁶⁰ Ibid. 269.

²⁶¹ Ibid. 271.

²⁶² Ibid. 268.

sense that capital needs living labor more than living labor needs capital. Living labor is the active force in capital accumulation and all that it needs for its survival is the material world. In order to clarify this aspect of Marx's capital/labor relationship, I now turn to Nick Dyer-Witherford's, Cyber-Marx, and the Autonomist Marxist analysis of capital and labor. Although, I will not delve too deeply in their analyses, I have included them in this part, because to a certain extent they are clearer than Marx in describing the capital/labor relationship and labor's resiliency against capital. According to Dyer-Witherford, it was Marx who stated that "labor [is] the living form-giving flame. . . [that was] constitutive of society"²⁶³ and it was Autonomist Marxist theorists like Mario Tronti who popularized this aspect of Marx's analysis. According to Mario Tronti, to put "capitalist development first and worker second. . . is a mistake. . . we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity"²⁶⁴. Consequently, according to Dyer-Witherford:

Far from being a passive object . . . the worker is in fact the active subject of production, the wellspring of the skills. . . on which capital depends. Capital attempts to incorporate labor as an object, a component in its cycle of value extraction. . . is always partial. Laboring subjects resist capital's reduction. Labor is for capital. . . a problematic "other" that must constantly be controlled and subdued [because it] persistently. . . challenges. . . command. Rather than being organized by capital, workers struggle against it. . . [because] capital. . . needs labor. But labor does not need capital. Labor can dispense. . . with capitalism, and find different ways to organize [itself].²⁶⁵

Form this perspective, labor is constantly resisting capital appropriation, fighting to break free and reorganize the labor process in its favor. Although, it appears that capital completely

²⁶³ Nick Dyer-Witherford, Cyber-Marx (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) 65.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 65-68.

dominates labor through appropriation, totally having appropriated labor's creative yields and property into its sphere, this is false according to Dyer-Witherford and Autonomia. It is false because capital is so dependent on the labor process which precedes its appropriation. Similarly, Marx states, "the presupposition of capital as the dominant power. . .[is] mystification"²⁶⁶. This is as far as I want to take Dyer-Witherford's and Autonomia's capital/labor analysis since their analysis predominantly reiterates Marx's earlier work and moves us away from our focus.

Returning to Marx's analysis, Marx states that capital can never fully dominate or appropriate labor since labor's well being is crucial to capital accumulation and survival. In this respect, according to Marx, capital must allow time and space for labor to reproduce itself (i.e. to labor on itself). As a result, this process of reproduction gives labor time off from capital accumulation and the opportunity to resist capital, or in Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno's case to develop a critique of capitalism. For example, Marx states in Capital that:

The value of labor-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labor-time necessary for the production, and consequently also the reproduction, of this special article. . . Given the individual, the production of labor-power consists in his reproduction of himself [and] his maintenance. . . The owner of labor-power is mortal. If his appearance in the market is to be continuous. . . the seller of labor-power must perpetuate himself. . . The labor-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear and death, must be continually replaced.²⁶⁷

This means, however, in order to maximize labor-power, capital has to allow time off for labor to

²⁶⁶ Karl Marx, "Grundrisse," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 259.

²⁶⁷ Karl Marx, "Capital (Volume One)," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 339-340.

replenish itself. For this reason, capital must give labor some autonomy away from capital production in order to rest, think, eat, sleep, communicate, procreate and educate itself, along with number of other activities that maximize labor-power. An example that Marx gives is the long process of education which requires capital to invest a great sum of labor-time in living labor so that it can exert complex labor activity once reintegrated into capital production.

In order to modify the human organism, so that it may acquire skill and handiness in a given branch of industry, and become labor-power of a special kind, a special education or training is requisite, and this, on [capital's] part, costs an equivalent in commodities of a greater or less amount. This amount varies according to . . . character of the labor-power. The expenses of this education. . . enter pro tanto into the total value spent in its production.²⁶⁸

Once in the educational system, living labor (i.e. the worker) is given some leeway in order to labor on himself, learning, analyzing, theorizing etc. Consequently, this leeway can be utilized against the capital system itself. In fact, capital's allocation of this leeway, which is so crucial to the replenishment of labor-power and therefore capital itself, is a reason why labor always escapes total domination and reintegration, and ultimately tries to pry itself loose of capital's grip.

In this respect, Marx's analysis of the capital/labor relationship goes a long way in explaining, why Debord, Horkheimer and Adorno's individual critique of capital escapes domination and why Debord's revolutionary project can occur. However, Marx's analysis undermines the validity of Debord's all-encompassing spectacle and the Frankfurt School's totally administered society. Consequently, once the spectacle's domination is understood as

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 340.

imperfect, but still exerting a powerful force both physically through modern industry and mentally through the culture industry, a new theoretical framework must be put forward. For this reason, I would like to argue that Debord's "spectacle" is akin to Antonio Gramsci's theory of "hegemony". Although, Gramsci's notion of hegemony primarily revolved around cultural hegemony, Debord's "spectacle" is a hegemonic force exercising supremacy both within the cultural sphere through its culture industries and within the economic sphere through its modern industries.

Although I have briefly covered Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony in the introduction, it is important to reiterate some crucial points due to the fact that these points are essential for understanding Debord's "spectacle" as a socio-economic hegemony. Foremost, Antonio Gramsci defines "hegemony" as a situation where a social alliance is able to exert authority over subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by directly imposing its ruling ideas on them, but by winning and shaping consent so that its power and its ideas appear both legitimate and natural, while opposing ideas and groups appear illegitimate and unnatural. According to Gramsci:

Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes [or spectacle] succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range. . .[hence] hegemony. . .is not universal and "given" to the continuing rule of a particular class. It has to be won, reproduced, sustained. . .[It] is. . . a "moving equilibrium" containing relations of forces favorable or unfavorable to it.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁹ Dick Hebdige, Subculture (New York: Routledge, 1979) 16.

In many respects, Debord's "spectacle" and the Frankfurt School's administered society exercises this type of "hegemony" by constantly adjusting itself, through education, the economy and the media. Debord acknowledges that the spectacle's foundation is based on constant change and that the spectacle constantly adjusts itself to conflicting discourses. For example, he states that "the spectacle is founded on change. . . this is its natural state"²⁷⁰ and that the spectacle allows "different star commodities simultaneously [to] promote conflicting approaches to the organization of society"²⁷¹. Hence, Debord's description is very similar to Gramsci's notion of a hegemonic force, a moving equilibrium, constantly adjusting itself to subordinate different theories and ideologies. Of course, Debord would disagree with the idea that the spectacle is a hegemonic force rather than a totalitarian force. Instead he would argue that the conflicting theories and ideologies within the spectacle are merely "differing forms of a single alienation contend in the masquerade of total freedom of choice"²⁷². However, his response only means that his critique is simply a differing form of a single alienation and that it is extending the spectacle's control.

To avoid this contradiction requires the dismissal of the idea that the spectacle is all-encompassing. Acknowledging that the spectacle is a hegemonic force allows one to hold the idea that the spectacle exerts a power influence and that its influence can be subverted given that certain social groups, ideologies and critiques do escape indoctrination and domination. For example, Horkheimer and Adorno describe the effect of hegemony when they state that:

²⁷⁰ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 26.

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, 42.

²⁷² *Ibid*, 41.

Under the private culture monopoly. . .you are free. . .to think [differently]. . . your life, your property everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us. Not to conform means to be rendered powerless. . .[an] outsider. . .excluded from. . .concern".²⁷³

These are the effects of hegemony, where the individual is free to think differently, but in doing so is ostracized and rendered powerless because he does not share in the dominant ideology. For Horkheimer and Adorno, hegemony increasingly results in one choice, "the. . . choice is either to join in or be left behind"²⁷⁴. As we can see, both Debord's "spectacle" and the Frankfurt School's "totally administered society" can coincide with Antonio Gramsci's theory of "hegemony", which acknowledges the powerful force of the administered society and the spectacle, while allowing for both a critique of the spectacle and the possibility of change to exist. It is important to understand Debord's "spectacle" as a hegemony because it liberates his revolutionary project from the spectacle's grasp and contextualizes the events of May 68 as an attempt by the students and strikers to appropriate the means of production in order to subvert the dominant capitalist hegemony in France.

I will now discuss and compare Debord's revolutionary project with that of Marx, examining how each thought massive social change would occur. To a certain extent, I have already hinted at this with the appropriation of the means of production by subordinate social groups, but it is important that I discuss this in greater detail since the May 68 upheavals are

²⁷³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1969) 133.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 148.

closely related to Debord's revolutionary project. Crucial to any "hegemony" is Marx's idea that those who control the means of production also control the dominant ideas within society. Their hegemony is produced and reproduced because they control the means of production. For example, Marx states:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling, therefore the ideas of its dominance.²⁷⁵

This characteristic of hegemony means that hegemony is a socio-economic force based within both the cultural sphere and the political sphere, just as Debord's "spectacle" is. For any alternative hegemony to develop and sustain itself requires the appropriation of the means of production. As Marx states, only with "the appropriation of . . . [the] instruments of production is . . . the individual. . . and the proletariat [able to] rid itself of everything that still clings to its previous position in society"²⁷⁶. Consequently, both Marx and Debord's revolutionary project involves the appropriation of the means of production in the name of the proletariat. In fact this is the basis of both their divergent revolutionary projects.

Foremost, Marx's revolutionary project lies with the proletariat. It is the revolutionary force that has produced the commodity society. Therefore, the proletariat is the one force that can

²⁷⁵ Dick Hebdige, Subculture (New York: Routledge, 1979) 15.

²⁷⁶ Karl Marx, "German Ideology," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 191.

dissolve it. Marx defines the proletariat as a class whose poverty is artificially produced:

A class. . . which has radical chains, a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its suffering is universal. . . [it] is a sphere of society which claims no traditional status by only a human status, a sphere which is. . . totally opposed to the assumptions of the. . . political system; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society. . . this is . . . the proletariat. For what constitutes the proletariat is not naturally existing poverty, but poverty artificially produced.²⁷⁷

According to Marx, because there are inherent contradictions within capitalism, capitalism will bring forth its own dissolution. He argues that as competition increases among capitalists, which it inevitably must in order for capital to grow, proletarianization increases:

The more productive capital grows, the more the division of labor and the application of machinery expands. The more division of labor and the application of machinery expands, the more competition among [capitalists and among] workers increases. . . In addition, the working class gains recruits from the higher strata of society.²⁷⁸

The result is that capitalists bring forth a class that is diametrically opposed to bourgeois capitalism. Eventually, this process will lead to a class conflict that will culminate in the abolition of all classes:

When the proletariat announces the dissolution of the existing social order [i.e. a class society based on division], it only declares the secret of its own existence, for it is the effective dissolution of this order. When the proletariat demands the negation of private

²⁷⁷ Karl Marx, "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 64.

²⁷⁸ Karl Marx, "The Critique of Capitalism," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 216.

property it only lays down as principle for society what [bourgeois] society has already made a principle for the proletariat and what the latter already involuntarily embodies as the negative result of society.²⁷⁹

According to Marx, the proletariat is both the revolutionary class and the class that drives history.

First, because it is the largest class, whose members' labor allows capitalism to continue.

Secondly, because its class interests place it in direct conflict with bourgeois capitalism. However, according to Marx, the proletariat is unaware of itself as a class. It is separated due to the division of labor. Hence, Marx's revolutionary project primarily revolves around educating workers about their mutual oppression, political organization, class consciousness and revolution, so that workers can slowly become conscious of themselves as the revolutionary class, the proletariat.

For Marx, this educational process rests with the communist party intellectuals who, through extensive learning, can slowly make workers realize their mutual interests in subverting capitalism:

The communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. . . The communists are distinguished. . . by this only: In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. . . The communists [have]. . . the advantage of clearly understanding. . . the conditions. . . of the proletarian movement. . . The immediate aim of the communists is the. . . formation of the [workers] into a [proletariat] class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power. . . [as] communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Karl Marx, "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 65.

²⁸⁰ Karl Marx, The Communist Manifesto (London, England: Penguin Books, 1967) 95-99.

For Marx, proletarian revolution is a long arduous process that will be correctly achieved when workers attain class consciousness and organize themselves into the proletariat led by communist intellectuals. Only then will proletarian revolution be able “to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the laborer. . . [through] the abolition of private property”²⁸¹. However, there are problems with Marx’s revolutionary project which I will explore through Debord’s revolutionary project.

Within Debord’s analysis, the proletariat is the revolutionary class because it is the class that fuels capitalism. Debord defines the proletariat as “the vast mass of workers who have lost all power over the use of their own lives”²⁸² and whose fate “becomes the fate of society as a whole”²⁸³. However, despite the fact that like Marx Debord describes the proletariat as revolutionary, he also acknowledges that the bourgeoisie is a revolutionary class, but a class whose revolution is complete:

The two pure classes that whole thrust of [Marx’s] Capital analysis tend[s] to bring to the fore, are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These are also the only two revolutionary classes in history- but they are revolutionary under different conditions. The bourgeoisie is un fait accompli. The proletarian revolution is a project, formulated on the basis of earlier revolution but differing qualitatively from it. . . The bourgeois came to power because it was the class of the developing economy. The proletariat will never come to embody power unless it becomes the class of consciousness. The growth of the forces of production cannot in itself guarantee this accession to power.²⁸⁴

Although Debord agrees with Marx that the proletariat is the revolutionary class and that the

²⁸¹ Ibid. 97-99.

²⁸² Anselm Jappe, Guy Debord (Berkeley Calif.: University of California Press, 1999) 28.

²⁸³ Ibid. 28.

²⁸⁴ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 58.

proletariat's power derives from its class consciousness, Debord differs from Marx on how class consciousness and revolution will be achieved. First, contrary to Marx's belief that the development of the capitalist system itself will result in proletarian revolution, Debord believes proletariat emancipation will have to be forced by the revolutionary organization during class conflicts. Hence, rather than educating workers, as Marx's communists are meant to do, Debord's revolutionary organization is instead focused on intensifying and mobilizing the workers during an insurrection. According to Debord:

the proletariat cannot make use of any ideology. . . what constitutes the proletarian class as subject is its organizing of revolutionary struggle and its organizing of society at the moment of revolution: this is the point at which the practical conditions of consciousness must be assembled and the theory of praxis verified by virtue of its transformation into theory-in-practice.²⁸⁵

Although both Marx and Debord's revolutionary project strive for the "fusion of knowledge and action"²⁸⁶, as the point of any theory is not simply to "interpret the world. . . [but] to change it"²⁸⁷, contrary to Marx, Debord believes that there is no proletarian class until the moment of insurrection. Whereas Marx argues that only by attaining "class consciousness" and being united beforehand will a proletarian revolution ensue, Debord claims the proletariat is not united as a class and does not achieve class consciousness until in the midst of a revolution. For this reason, Debord argues that the task of any revolutionary organization is to encourage class conflicts and

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 59.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 59.

²⁸⁷ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978) 144.

then to mobilize workers during revolutionary struggles. Only in this way will the proletariat realize itself as a class. Consequently, Debord's project is akin to a spontaneous revolution, where all the elements for proletarian emancipation will spontaneously merge. Nonetheless, this aspect of Debord's revolutionary project needs further explanation.

Thus, at this point, I would like to refer to Lukács' analysis of proletarian class consciousness and Jerry Rubin's analysis of spontaneous/festive revolution in his book, Revolution For the Hell of It. Although I will not delve too deeply in Lukács analysis and Jerry Rubin's book, their analysis is important in explaining Debord's revolutionary project. First and foremost, a spontaneous/festive revolution is a revolution where people spontaneously rise-up of their own volitions to protest and contest the current social system. According to Jerry Rubin, a spontaneous/festive revolution is a "festival of joy. . . Joy [in] saying no and living no to a government grown old and evil. . . Joy [of] living in history . . . Joy of doing in history. . . free of [hierarchy]"²⁸⁸. Similarly, Debord describes the Paris uprisings of 1871 as an example of a spontaneous/festive revolution, referring to such events as:

the biggest festival of the nineteenth century. . . [where individuals] had [spontaneously] become the masters of their own history. . . The commune [was] incoherence, [a] lack of an apparatus. . . [without] leaders. . . This exemplary autonomy. . . [attacked] on the spot the petrified signs of the dominant organization of life"²⁸⁹.

In this respect, a spontaneous/festive revolution is disorganized, chaotic, joyful, without visible

²⁸⁸ Jerry Rubin, Revolution For the Hell of It (New York: The Dial Press, 1968) 111.

²⁸⁹ Guy Debord, "These on the Paris commune," Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 314-315.

leaders and appearing as a massive release of social energy. Secondly, for Lukács and Debord, out of these types of revolution and conflicts workers attain class consciousness and develop into the proletariat. According to Lukács, it was Rosa Luxemburg who perceived that mass organization was the effect of class conflict in the sense that only in the midst of conflicts did a true working class movement and consciousness, that could be called proletariat, congeal:

Rosa Luxemburg perceived at a very early stage that organization is much more likely to be the effect than the cause of the revolutionary process, just as the proletariat can constitute itself as class only in and through revolution. In this process . . . the party . . . must ensure that “in every phase and every aspect of the struggle the total sum of the available power of the proletariat that has already been unleashed should be mobilized and that it should be expressed in the fighting stance of the Party”.²⁹⁰

As a result, for Lukács, a revolutionary organization's or a party's job is not to educate workers, but to clarify class struggles and mobilize workers during conflicts. According to Lukács, only in this way will the proletariat realize itself as a class and only in this way will the party truly be the legitimate representative of the proletariat, since it will have proved itself through struggle. For Lukács, the party must place itself at the center of the conflict in order that it may become the embodiment of the proletariat through action and that it may raise the movement out of the struggles for mere economic gains into an insurrectional proletarian force capable of transforming reality on every social level.

[the party] must immerse its own truth in the spontaneous mass movement and raise it

²⁹⁰ Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1968) 41.

from the depths of economic necessity, where it was conceived, on the heights of free, conscious action. In so doing [the party] will transform itself in the moment of the outbreak of revolution from a party that makes demands to one that imposes an effective reality. This change from demand to reality becomes the lever of the truly class-oriented and truly revolutionary organization of the proletariat. Knowledge becomes action, theory becomes battle slogan, the masses act in accordance with the slogans and join the ranks of the organized vanguard more consciously.²⁹¹

Lukács claim that only when the party has fought along side regular workers can it become the leader of the revolution and of a new proletarian reality. The party is legitimated only by “living and dying for the revolution”²⁹². Similar to Lukács’ idea concerning the role of the party, Debord’s revolutionary organization becomes the legitimate representative of the proletariat through active participation in struggles. Only “through struggle . . . [does] it [i.e. the revolutionary organization] represent . . . the proletarian revolution”²⁹³. Thus, Lukács and Debord’s idea concerning the purpose of a revolutionary organization directly conflicts with Marx’s idea that the communist party must educate workers in order that they can unite as a class and instigate gradual social change. For Lukács and Debord, the proletariat and proletarian class consciousness can only come to fruition through active participation in conflicts. No amount of education can unite workers and push them to realize proletarian revolution. Likewise, Jerry Rubin argues that a revolution is learned through practice rather than through education due to the fact that revolutions are highly unstable and unpredictable:

²⁹¹ Ibid. 41-42.

²⁹² Ibid. 43.

²⁹³ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 88-89.

One realizes that action is the only reality [for revolution]. . . There are those who believe that it is necessary for ideas to triumph among the greater part of the masses before initiating action, and there are others who understand that action is one of the most efficient instruments for bringing about the triumph of ideas among the masses. . . There is no way to run a revolution. . . One practices [revolution] by acting. . . [only] revolution[s] . . . build links [between] people outside the system.²⁹⁴

From Debord, Lukács and Rubin's perspectives, only through actions can one learn revolution, congeal into a proletariat and build new links outside the system. For them, actions are the only reality. An example that Rubin gives is the Cuban revolution where a small armed band of guerilla fighters were able, through their dedication, their vigilance and their actions to develop into a mass movement that became representative of the Cuban people. Rubin quotes Fidel Castro's speech at the closing of the First Conference of the Latin American Organization of Solidarity (OLAS) in 1967 when he stated that "whoever hesitates while waiting for ideas to triumph among the masses before initiating revolutionary action will never be a revolutionary"²⁹⁵. Ideas attain mass appeal through actions, rather than through education. Consequently, for Rubin, Lukács and Debord, revolutionary actions are the only means to class consciousness and emancipation. Anything other than revolution simply integrates individuals into the capitalist system, where they ultimately forgo their revolution for material gains. Rubin states that this has become the fate of American workers where:

most workers in America [now] have a good deal materialistically. . . [since] the struggle between working class and the bosses in traditional Marxist economy theory [was] built

²⁹⁴ Jerry Rubin, Revolution For the Hell of It (New York: The Dial Press, 1968) 9-18.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

on a premise of security. A good many people will have to change their ideas. . . It is. . . obvious that a lot of fat cats living high off the hog are going to have the get their asses kicked. . . people have to begin to live the revolution and to live it now. . . we have ten million poor people in the country. . . it is that contradiction that keeps many of us in the streets. . . throwing Molotov Cocktails. . . What would happen if large number people decided to fuck the system . . . we'd have ourselves one hell of a revolution, thats what.²⁹⁶

Rubin's statement highlights a crucial flaw in Marx's project for progressive working class gains.

When working class movements abandon immediate proletarian revolution and merely attempt to increase their individual security and their economic gains, they become invested in capitalism, and inadvertently become supporters of it. Of course, Marx constantly reiterated that his "theory came on the scene too soon, and [thus] needed to be taught. . . [since] the time was not, by a long way ripe"²⁹⁷, and that the aim of his analysis was always directed at proletarian emancipation.

However, according to Debord, it was not Marx, but subsequent Marxists thinkers that perverted Marx's revolutionary theory and turned it into a bourgeois ideology. Debord states that subsequent Marxists thinkers turned Marx's revolutionary theory into a bourgeois ideology when they dissociated themselves from Marx's proletarian revolution:

The scientific-determinism side of Marx's thought was indeed what made it vulnerable to "ideologization"; the breach was opened in Marx's own lifetime. . . in this way revolutionary practice- the only true agent of this negation- tended to be thrust out of theory's field altogether. It became important patiently to study economic development, and once more to accept. . . the suffering it imposed. . . Marx upheld his theory's unitary standpoint, yet [later] it was. . . mutilated. . . taken as definitive . . . Marx's theory became "Marxism". . . The weakness of Marx's theory is naturally part and parcel the weakness of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 217-219.

²⁹⁷ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 55.

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 55.

This separation between Marx's analysis and the proletarian revolution, meant that Marxist thinkers and working class parties became invested in the system through economic gains and became tolerant of capital exploitation. By directing themselves solely at increasing their economic gains, unions and socialist parties become promoters and supporters of the very mechanisms that are enslaving them; in fact, they become bourgeois and part of the problem. For instance, Rubin gives the example of once having "given fifteen-thousand copies of Fuck the System [for] free. . . [and the] communists [were] always the one[s] with the plans . . . to make money on the book"²⁹⁹. Consequently, these plans were always counter-productive to the revolutionary cause.

In the eyes of Rubin, Lukács and Debord, Marx's idea that proletarian revolution would occur through gradual gains made his revolutionary project vulnerable to capital appropriation because the working class movements could slowly be appeased and re-appropriated back into the dominant capitalist hegemony by short-term monetary gains. As a result, Debord and Rubin advocate spontaneous/festive revolution because this type of revolution negates gradual appeasement and re-integration of workers movements since that this type of revolution is dynamic, immediate, disorganized and without hierarchy.

For Debord, Lukács and Rubin, this type of revolution negates Marx's notion that workers must have class consciousness before a proletarian revolution can succeed. According to

²⁹⁹ Jerry Rubin, Revolution For the Hell of It (New York: The Dial Press, 1968) 230.

Lukács, Debord and Rubin, only through revolution and decisive actions do these various aspects come together as a cohesive whole. Rubin's spontaneous/festive revolution is where you "are the revolution [where you] do your [own] thing. . .[where] there are no rules. . .[no] system. . .[or] boundaries"³⁰⁰. Likewise Debord and the S. I. conceived spontaneous/festive revolution as a "festival . . .[where] play is the ultimate principle of this festival, and the only rules . . . are to . . . enjoy without restraints"³⁰¹. For Debord, the goal of the revolutionary organization is to maximize, sustain, coalesce this mass festival on a global scale if possible. In this respect, Debord and the S. I.'s notion of spontaneous/festive revolution transforms debates on class consciousness, the proletariat and revolution, since for them, only by actively and autonomously participating in revolution do workers realize themselves as the proletarian class. Subsequently, in chapter four, I will discuss Debord and the Situationist International's position within the May 68 uprisings, examining how the general strike of May 68 had the appearance of a spontaneous/festive revolution and how the S. I. attempted to intensify the conflict and mobilize mass support.

Conclusion

Within this chapter, I have presented the theoretical roots of Debord's socio-economic critique and examined the similarities and differences between his analysis and Hegel's dialectical

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 11.

³⁰¹ Guy Debord and the Situationist International, On the Poverty of Student Life (Strasbourg: www.Situationist.cjb.net, 1966) 13.

method, Marx's analysis of alienated labor, the Frankfurt School's analysis and Lukács' analysis. I have also demonstrated that similar to the Frankfurt School, Debord's critique has transformed debates on capitalism, power, the mass media and everyday life by arguing that capitalism has intensified and expanded to such an extent that image/object commodities dominate all social relationships. In addition, I have criticized Debord's idea of an all-encompassing spectacle, arguing that if the spectacle consumes everything and everyone, how is a proletarian revolution supposed to occur? In answering this question I have referred to Marx's analysis of capital and labor and Gramsci's theory of "hegemony", explaining that Debord's spectacle is a hegemonic force rather than an all-encompassing force. Finally, I have examined Debord's revolutionary project, comparing it with Marx, Lukács and Jerry Rubin's revolutionary projects.

All in all, Debord's critique is primarily a reconstitution of Marx's various analyses. Debord bases his theoretical framework on Marx's analysis of alienated labor, his notion of increasing proletarianization, class struggle, historical materialism, proletarian revolution and his idea for the unity of theory and practice. Debord's analysis expands on Marx in three ways. Firstly that individuals, in addition to being alienated producers, are now alienated consumers. Secondly, that modern industry has now given rise to the culture industry, and finally, that the spectacle now absorbs all society. The result is the death of the self, the death of culture, the destruction of cities, the creation of planned environments and ultimately the total falsification of reality. According to Debord everything is trivialized, homogenized and commodified to the point where nothing is real. Consequently, for Debord, it is only through spontaneous/festive revolution that workers will attain class consciousness, become the proletarian class and be able to subvert the

domination that the capitalist order holds. Hence, in the next chapter, I will examine Debord and the Situationist International's position and actions during the May 68 upheavals.

Chapter 4

The Situationist International and the May 68 Uprisings

Due to the extensive material and the multitude of perspectives on the events of May 68, I will only look at May 68 from the perspective of the Situationist International, since to examine all the material and the various points of view takes us away from our focus. Nonetheless, I realize that when events of this magnitude take place, many perspectives develop from both the active participants and the many scholars that examine the various causes and outcomes of the event. However, the purpose of this study is not to analyze the various actors and their aims during May 68 but instead to discuss the S. I.'s position and its actions.

Chiefly, this section deals with the beginning, middle and end of the events of May 68, examining the student uprisings, the general strike across France, the occupation of the Sorbonne, the government concessions, with particular emphasis on the S. I. and its position within these events and its relationship to the Enragés movement and the mass media. I will also discuss the S. I.'s writings and speeches during the event. Two main arguments are highlighted in this chapter. The first is that the S. I. was marginalized in the media, constantly described as a mysterious anarchist group controlling the various student movements. The second argument is that the S. I. provided the philosophical underpinnings for the May 68 uprisings with its ideas concerning détournement, workers' councils, slogans, spontaneous/festive revolution and its actions within the occupational committee. As a result of its actions and ideas, the S. I. influenced debates on power, capitalism, everyday life and revolution in the sense that the May 68 uprisings temporarily

validated some of its principles and the notion that festive/spontaneous revolution could occur in highly developed industrial nations.

The May 68 Uprisings

It is important to note that, according to the S. I., this event was unusual by historical standards since there was no real economic crisis or any longstanding questions of political legitimacy in France. France, at the time, could be considered a well-functioning welfare state. According to Greil Marcus' book, Lipstick Traces, this event was not the result of any traditional cause, but was, as Henri Lefebvre and the S. I. had stated, a massive manifestation of a negation that has always been inherent in modernity. Marcus states:

The event. . . did not play by the rules of history. There was no economic crisis; no question of political legitimacy . . . raised by anyone with a forum commensurate to such a question. There was a modern, well-functioning capitalist welfare state, led by a man of enormous resilience and prestige. . . there was [however]. . . a natural hegemonic fact, the ever-present sense of what Lefebvre would later call the negation that modernity carries within itself: a sense, as Situationist René Viénet wrote just after May 68, [of] "the familiar in alienated life, and in the refusal of that life." In other words, there was a sleeping sense of . . . displacement to which modernity could not afford to grant a language . . . [which] was [finally] found.³⁰²

Consequently, from the S. I.'s perspective, May 68 was not about economic demands or political crisis, but about a genuine refusal to accept the current economic and social order in France. In an

³⁰² Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 426.

article entitled “The Origins of the Agitation in France”, René Viénet states that May 68 was a “refusal. . .being affirmed”³⁰³ that originated with Les Enragés and its actions at the University of Nanterre. Les Enragés was a small anarchist group which formed a few month prior to 1968. The group initially comprised of half a dozen students who were sympathetic to the S. I.’s principles and bent on educational reforms and creating social unrest. According to the S. I., it was this group that “began [the] systematic assault on the unbearable order of things, beginning with the university”³⁰⁴. Although, Viénet and the S. I. state that there was student dissent prior to May 68, what was lacking in these movements was a consciousness of both a real revolutionary perspective and practical organization. In his 1968 book, Enragés et Situationnistes dans le Mouvement des Occupations, Viénet states that in France, through Les Enragés, which embodied some of the S. I.’s theories and practices, student movements were able to centralize their dissent and direct it at the capitalist social order that was oppressing them:

Le refus qui était déjà, dans plusieurs pays, porté par de larges couches de la jeunesse. . .manquait. . .la conscience d’une réelle perspective révolutionnaire et son organisation pratique . . . [mais] la formation du group des Enragés [sur] le campus de Nanterre. . .figuraient tous parmi les éléments inassimilables dans l’actuel système universitaire. . .[ont] trouvé leur accord théorique dans la plate-forme de L’internationale situationniste. Ils [on finalement] proposer de perturber systématiquement l’insupportable ordre des choses. . .L agitation déclenchée en Janvier 1968 à . . .constituer. . .sous cinq mois, une quasi-liquidation de l’État.³⁰⁵

Of course, the S. I.’s broad generalization about other movements across the world not having a

³⁰³ René Viénet, “The Origins of the Agitation in France,” Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1968) 1.

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 1-2.

³⁰⁵ René Viénet, Enragés et Situationniste dans le Mouvement des Occupations (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 25-26.

revolutionary program or theoretical base is a bit of a misconception. However within the French context, Les Enragés' actions in January did appear to have sparked a set of circumstances that eventually led to the temporary liquidation of the state. Consequently for the S. I., May 68 originated with Les Enragés and its actions during January 1968 when for the first time, according to the S. I., direct confrontations with the social order began to take place.

The first of these confrontations occurred on January 8th, 1968, when the Minister for Youth and Sports was forced by Les Enragés to leave the inauguration of a swimming pool at the University of Nanterre, which is a suburban extension of the University of Paris. The situation began when the Minister of Youth and Sports, Francois Missoffe, came to Nanterre to inaugurate his ministry's pet-project, a new swimming pool that was to be part of a multi-million dollar sports complex. As he came on campus, the Minister was confronted with graffiti slogans, co-opted from the S. I. by Les Enragés, that announced messages such as "Vandal Orgies" and "Never Work"³⁰⁶, which also include a giant phallus scrawled on a wall of the Minister's official route. The ceremony was uneventful until near its conclusion when the leader of Les Enragés, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, approached the microphone and asked the Minister why his ministry's recent report on youths had not considered their sexual problems. The Minister furiously replied that "I'm quite willing to discuss the matter with responsible people, but you're clearly not one of them. I myself prefer sport to sexual education. If you have sexual problems, I suggest you jump

³⁰⁶ Patrick Deale and Maureen McConville, Red Flag/Black Flag (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1968) 29.

[image 15]

Le 26 janvier.

in the pool”³⁰⁷. As a result, Cohn-Bendit responded to the ministers blunt remark, by stating “that’s what the Hitler Youth used to say”³⁰⁸, upon which the Minister left the stage amidst laughter and ridicule from the crowd of students. The exchange made Les Enragés media stars and campus heroes. In addition, the incident only encouraged Les Enragés to devise more elaborate schemes to disrupt their university’s activities.

On January 26th, amidst speculations that Cohn-Bendit was to be arrested and expelled from the university, Les Enragés, who in the span of two weeks had grown from 6 members to around 50 members, devised a plan to clash with police. First, an S. I. banner was hung from the entrance of the campus saying “Never Work”, then photographs of police officers were pinned on placards and paraded up and down the halls of the sociology building sparking a scuffle with an administrative officer who was eventually thrown out of the building. As a result, the police were called in and instructed to make arrests. Upon arriving, the police were pelted with debris by Les Enragés [image 15], who had planned to lead them into an ambush. They drew the police in front of a lecture hall, where at an exact moment the doors of the lecture hall were opened and a thousand students poured out for their midday break and were caught in the crossfire.³⁰⁹ With Les Enragés retreating into the crowd, anger and violence exploded on both sides. Les Enragés resorting to strategies of direct action, eventually led the crowd towards the police:

Armed with benches as battering rams, chair legs, stones, and bottles, the student mob drove into the police ranks, separating them, swamping them, chasing them etc. . .

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 29.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 29.

³⁰⁹ Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, Red Flag/ Black Flag (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1968) 31.

Windows were shattered, cars bashed about, men wounded in both camps. Defeated, the police fled from the campus. The Enragés had become a rabble [student] army. . .[their] technique had worked. . .provocation had drawn repression, which, in turn, had rallied mass support. . .a state of mind [was created].³¹⁰

The incident made Les Enragés a national news story and popularized both the S. I. and Les Enragés principles. On the same day in Caen, there were violent exchanges between police and workers striking at a lorry factory. As workers demanded higher salaries, smaller hierarchization and slower rates of production, they moved beyond mild union protest tactics to issue an all out strike and a mass demonstration in the city center.³¹¹ This led to violent clashes with police in the city streets until five a.m. and resulted in two hundred injured people. The workers' rejection of their unions' moderate tactics would become magnified during the month of May as workers continued to resort to violence and large strikes.³¹² It was the unity of these two sections of the French population, students and workers, that finally resulted in the May 68 occupations and the temporary liquidation of the state-government. These two separate events set in motion a set of circumstances and violence clashes that continued throughout February, March and April, culminating in the May 68 occupations.

On February 7th, an anti-Vietnam committee organized a demonstration against the United-States Vietnam policy that resulted in violent exchanges with police. On February 14th, there were incidences at universities throughout France as students demanded freedom of speech, freedom of movement, more universities, smaller classrooms, higher wages, more free time, self-

³¹⁰ Ibid, 31.

³¹¹ Keith Reader, The May 68 Events in France (London, England: Macmillan Publications, 1993) 7.

³¹² Ibid, 7.

governance, the immediate withdraw of U. S. troops from Vietnam³¹³ and “[the S. I.’s] revolution of everyday life”³¹⁴. Consequently, the S. I. was depicted in the media as the instigators of the student movement and various student movements were described as representatives for the S. I. and their revolution. On February 21st, the newspaper, Le Nouvel Observateur, stated “La gauche est éclatée. . . [Le] groupe des Enragés. . . ne comprend [pas] la guerre . . . [sans] trois ou quatre représentants de l’Internationale Situationniste”³¹⁵. As a result of this article, which essentially described the S. I. as leaders of the uprisings, Les Enragés publicly stated that they had never been a part of the Situationist International:

Nous avons. . . jamais appartenu à l’Internationale Situationniste, et en conséquence ne saurions la représenter. La répression aurait trop beau jeu si toute manifestation quelque peu radicale sur un campus était le fait d’un complot situationniste!. . . Cela dit, nous tenons à réaffirmer en la circonstance notre sympathie à l’égard de la critique situationniste. On pourra juger sur nos actes de notre accord avec la théorie radicale.³¹⁶

Despite acknowledging that they had never been a part of the S. I., Les Enragés reaffirm that they measured their actions in relation to the S. I.’s critique of capitalist society. They reiterated that their movement was acting autonomously and that it was the authorities who were propagating the illusion that the S. I. was the cause of student radicalism in France. Nonetheless, Les Enragés did acknowledge that the S. I. had provided the philosophical underpinnings for their actions. For example, during their university disruptions, Les Enragés utilized S. I. slogans such as “Be Cruel”

³¹³ Mark Kishlansky, Patrick Geary and Patricia O’Brien, Civilization in the West (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995) 946.

³¹⁴ Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 107

³¹⁵ René Viénet, Enragés et Situationnistes dans le Mouvement des Occupations (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 34.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

[image 16]

[image 17]

and “Never Work” [image 16] which they painted on various university walls. They also resorted to methods of “détournement”. For instance, resorting to the subversive method that the S. I. theorized is “the heavy artillery that breaks through all. . . Chinese walls”³¹⁷, Les Enragés took chairs and benches, which are traditionally benign objects, and subverted their function by using them against the system that created them as weapons against police and as barricades. According to S. I. member, René Viénet, détournement and graffiti would become a lasting trademark of the May 68 uprisings. He states that these attributes of the S. I. and Les Enragés “a inaugur[er]. . . une forme d’agitation . . . foudroyant, . . . qui allait devenir une des caractéristiques originales de la période des occupations”³¹⁸ [image 17]. During the occupations, détournement would eventually expand into barricades and civil unrest.

Even so, as a result of the violent student protests, on February 22nd, the Minister of Education announced the limited liberalization of access to universities and other minor educational reforms. But, these reforms did not quell the various student movements. On March 22nd, Les Enragés organized an occupation at the University of Nanterre where one hundred and fifty students claiming to be anarchists, occupied the university’s administrative tower. Their actions resulted in the cancellation of class until April 1st. The occupation began as a response to some arrests that had taken place the previous night. Some left-wing commandos were captured after they attacked the American Express building in Paris, protesting the Vietnam War. One of the six captured was a member of Les Enragés. As a result, Les Enragés decided to occupy the

³¹⁷Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, “A User’s Guide to Détournement,” Les Lèvres Nues#8 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1956) 3.

³¹⁸René Viénet, Enragés et Situationnistes dans le Mouvement des Occupations (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 34-35.

administrative building in protest of the arrests, where Cohn-Bendit and Les Enragés resolved that because the administrative tower happened to be open and unguarded at certain times, the venue would make an excellent place for such a protest since the tower was a symbolic representation of power. Furthermore, Les Enragés located their protest in La Salle Du Conseil de Faculté where the governing body always met. Nonetheless, eventually they left the tower the next morning to prepare for a “day of anti-imperialist debate and struggle”³¹⁹, but not without leaving a multitude of S. I. slogans on the walls.

This occupation marked an important point in the events of May 68 in the sense that the students who were traditionally regarded as docile occupied a major site of symbolic power. This was an unprecedented action and embarrassing for the university. This occupation would become identified as the method of protest for May 68. The event also became synonymous with the student movement at Nanterre, who were dubbed the “22nd March Movement”³²⁰. Additionally, the event also marked the rejection of traditional political styles of organizations as various individuals from various political allegiances were able to unite “in contempt for the outmoded authoritarianism of de Gaulle and the Parti Communiste Française (PCF)”³²¹. Even Daniel Cohn-Bendit remarked that those Stalinists who participated in the occupation were no longer Stalinists, since they have broken with their party ranks, “Les staliniens qui sont ici ce soir ne sont plus des staliniens”³²². Finally, the event marked an overall rejection by students of the Union Nationale

³¹⁹ Keith Reader, The May 68 Events in France (London, England: Macmillan Publications, 1993) 8.

³²⁰ Ibid. 8.

³²¹ Ibid. 9.

³²² René Viénet, Enragés et Situationistes dans le Mouvement des Occupations (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 34.

Des Étudiants de France (UNEF). By mid April the union was on the brink of total collapse with various leftist student groups fighting for its control.

As a result of the administrative tower occupation, Cohn-Bendit and the other agitators were reprimanded and slated to appear in front of the administrative council of the University of Paris on May 6th, where their academic futures were to be reviewed. Also, Cohn-Bendit was arrested on April 27th under a false charge that accused him of conspiring in the bombing of the American Express building. The S. I. was also blamed for the bombing and the March 22nd occupation. For example, on March 29th the newspaper, L'Humanité, stated that "les actions de commando[ont été] entreprises par un groupe d'anarchistes et de situationnistes. . .[aussi] une quarantaine d'éléments [situationniste] . . .irresponsables [ont] . . . provoquer des décision . . . graves concernant 12 000 étudiants. . .[et] le 22 Mars"³²³. It is important to note that the S. I. was continuously depicted throughout the events before, during and after May 68 as a mysterious anarchist group manipulating the dissident student movements and orchestrating the clashes with police.

I would like to refer to the discussion in my introduction where I state that a dominant hegemony must marginalize oppositional/counter-cultural movement since its continued survival depends on it. The mass media serves an important role in creating consent and allegiance towards the dominant ideology. Todd Gitlin's argument about what happened to the Student for a Democratic Society (SDS) movement can be applied to the S. I. during the events of May 68 and

³²³ Ibid, 40-41.

beyond. According to Gitlin, with the prominence of the mass media in the 1960's, movements became increasingly defined by the mass media:

The media bring[s] a manufactured public world into private space. From within their private crevices, people find themselves relying on the media for concepts, for images. . . , for [information] etc. . . [Hence] mass media define the public significance of movements. [Consequently] by blanking them out, actively depriv[ing] them of larger significance. . . [with] forms of coverage. . . systematic framing. . . this framing. . . determine[s] the movement's fate. . . [Nonetheless] the media do amplify the issues which fuel these same movements. . while [at the same time] disparaging [the] movements that radically oppose the system that needs reforming.³²⁴

Gitlin notes that while the SDS was able to propagate its issues on a national level, it was at the same time slowly marginalized and diffused by the mass media's framing techniques. The S. I. always shunned the media spotlight and understood that the media slowly commodified, marginalized and diffused movements, (see Chapter 3). In fact one of the S. I.'s primary aims was for people to turn to each other for information rather than to the media. However the media constantly depicted the S. I. as a specter haunting the May 68 uprisings.

Nevertheless, on May 1st, a trade union march from the Place de la République to the Place de la Bastille was given government permission for the first time in fourteen years. Additionally, upon Cohn-Bendit's release from prison, a protest was set-up for May 3rd, a few days before Cohn-Bendit's and the eight other members of the 22nd March movement were supposed to appear before a disciplinary committee. During the protest, police arrested five hundred students, which sparked an angry crowd of student protesters and onlookers to shout

³²⁴ Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching (Berkeley, California: University of California, 1980) 3-4.

[image 18]

slogans such as “Free our Comrades!”, “Stop Repression!”³²⁵. The police responded to the angry crowd of students by tear-gassing them and hitting them with batons. Instead of retreating, the crowd of students counter-attacked by throwing stones and building barricades in the Place du Luxembourg. These initial barricades would also become a trademark during the subsequent events of May 68.

On May 4th, after witnessing police brutality and the cancellation of courses at the Sorbonne, the student union, Union Nationale des Étudiant de France (UNEF) called for unlimited strikes throughout France’s universities. As a result, students battled on May 6th with police in the Latin quarters of Paris, building barricades and demanding the Sorbonne be re-opened. The riot caused 422 arrests but subsequently united student unions throughout France. Each vowed to support the dissent in Paris. In response to the student demands during the Latin quarters riots, the Minister of Education prohibited the re-opening of the Sorbonne. His defiance resulted in twenty thousand protesters gathering in the Latin quarter on May 10th where an intense night of riots and barricade building ensued. The effect of these riots resulted in 367 hospitalized and 468 arrested [image 18]. During this period of mass demonstrations, student occupations began occurring throughout France’s universities. Strasbourg and Nanterre were among the most active and violent.

Although, the barricades were in military terms worthless given that they posed no real threat to police equipment, their value resided in their symbolic representation as a historical

³²⁵Keith Reader, The May 68 Events in France (London, England: Macmillan Publications, 1993) 10.

[image 19]

[image 20]

[image 21]

return to the 1871 Paris commune, when barricades were spontaneously built as a sign of revolt against the state-government. In his book, May 68, Laurent Joffrin's comments that "the barricades were the sign of revolt and fraternity. They had no military value. . . [during] May 68 [other than] it was a sign. . . reviving. . . the memory of the Paris Commune"³²⁶. Similarly, the S. I. remarked that the barricades were a sign of the complete negation of the state:

L'installation d'un système de barricades tenant solidement tout un quartier était déjà un pas impardonnable vers la négation de L'État: n'importe quelle forme de pouvoir étatique était obligée de reconquérir à très court terme la zone des barricades qui lui avait échappé.³²⁷

This aspect of May 68 directly reflected the S. I.'s aspirations for the return to the spontaneous/festive revolution of the 1871 Paris communes. The barricades also reflected the S. I.'s concept of détournement as any capitalist object was subverted into a means of negation. For example, cars were burned and turned into barricades [image 19] and student occupations were turned into open forums of discussion [image 20]. All objects became political weapons to be used against the capitalist system [image 21]. Although most participants in May 68, besides Les Enragés, were unaware of the S. I.'s theory, the S. I. did theorize that détournement was the language by which any negation expressed itself, since "détournement . . . is the . . . language of anti-ideology"³²⁸. Hence, from this perspective, the S. I. philosophically buttressed the events of May 68. Their theories directly buttressed the methods of Les Enragés and the other groups that

³²⁶ Laurent Joffrin, May 68 (Paris: Seuil/Points, 1988) 113-114.

³²⁷ René Viénet, Enragés et Situationistes dans le Mouvement des Occupations (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 57.

³²⁸ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 146.

mimicked them, regardless of whether or not people were aware of the S. I.'s theory. Moreover, many of the students' demands reflected the S. I.'s critique and its objectives such as "the revolution of everyday life" and the organization of workers councils (more will be said on this later), and thirdly their subversive graffiti was disseminated everywhere that dissent occurred. Because of this, the dominant capitalist hegemony, through its mass media, continuously attempted to marginalize and trivialize the S. I. and the May 68 uprisings. In the May 4th issue of Le Monde, the newspaper trivialized the student movements as a bunch of conformists whose anger was nothing but pseudo-anger cloaked in S. I. rhetoric, "rien n'est moins révolutionnaire, rien n'est plus conformiste que la pseudo-colère d'un casseur de carreaux, même s'il habille sa manderi-noclastie d'un langage marxiste ou situationniste"³²⁹. Despite this marginalization, the uprisings continued.

On May 11th in response to the student uprisings, two main workers' unions in France called for a general strike, La Confédération Générale Du Travail (CGT) and La Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT). Fearing further riots and with all universities closed, Prime Minister Georges Pompidou appeared on television, granting all the students' demands. However this was too little and too late, since on May 13th massive demonstrations and occupations took place across France as students and workers united in the streets of Paris, turning the movement into an overtly political force that was putting "the Gaullist regime itself.

³²⁹ René Viénet, Enragés et Situationnistes dans le Mouvement des Occupations (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 41.

.into question³³⁰. According to Union polls, eight hundred thousand marched through the streets of Paris led by union and student leaders. Meanwhile once re-opened, the Sorbonne became occupied by various workers and student groups. In the following weeks, factories, stores, schools and universities eventually became occupied as “the battle for political power and individual autonomy translated itself into a battle for the possession of (physical and symbolic) space³³¹. On May 14th the Sub-Aviation Factory in Nantes was occupied; the next day the Renault Factory in Normandy was occupied. Other factories soon followed suite. The result was that the university occupations turned into open forums of discussions with the current state of the country as the main topic. Anyone was free to contribute tracts, posters, graffiti and political opinions during these open discussions.

For the S. I., the occupations were a dream come true. It was the validation of their notion that once occupied formerly alienated and structured spaces would be subverted into open democratic spaces where direct unmediated communication could take place away from the mass media and capitalist production. Debord stated that during May 68:

People found themselves at home everywhere. The recognized desire for dialogue, for completely free expression, and the taste for true community found their terrain in the buildings transformed into open meeting places. . .and [these] assemblies carried [the] true practice of communication.³³²

Within the occupations, individuals began to be democratically elected on a day-by-day basis as

³³⁰ Keith Reader, The May 68 Events in France (London, England: Macmillan Publications, 1993) 12.

³³¹ Ibid, 12.

³³² Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 430.

[image 22]

[image 23]

new organization channels between various occupation groups began to form amidst the disruptions³³³. By May 20th an estimated ten million workers were on strike. France was virtually paralyzed [image 22].

With the Sorbonne occupied [image 23], Les Enragés and the S. I. banded together on May 14th. Although the S. I. remained relatively quiet until the occupation of the Sorbonne, it did pledge its support for Les Enragés actions, even while they maintained that each was acting autonomously. Amidst constant accusations of being behind Les Enragés actions and the May 68 uprisings, the S. I. stated May 68 was the implementation of direct autonomous democracy and that Les Enragés were an independent movement, acting of its own volition, “le mouvement [68]. . . était. . . la démocratie directe. . . [et] Cohn-Bendit. . . appartenait. . . [a une] groupe anarchiste indépendant. . . [le reste cet] de l’information spectaculaire”³³⁴. Again, we see that the S. I. had to defend itself against marginalization.

Nonetheless, on the same day the S. I. and Les Enragés united, the S. I. and Les Enragés organized the first workers’ committee in the Sorbonne to which they were subsequently elected to. The committee was organized as a revolutionary council, “an assembly in permanent session, open to all, every delegate subject to daily reelection or rejection”³³⁵. The idea of workers’ councils, although first expressed by Lenin and Lukács, was championed and first implemented during the May 68 occupations by the Situationist International. In his 1967 book, The Society of the Spectacle, Debord theorized the power of the workers’ councils as:

³³³ Keith Reader, The May 68 Events in France (London, England: Macmillan Publications, 1993) 12-13.

³³⁴ René Viénet, Enragés et Situationistes dans le Mouvement des Occupations (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 37-38.

³³⁵ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 428.

that long-sought political form whereby the economic emancipation of labor might finally be achieved. . . the power of the workers' councils is the one context in which the problems of the revolution of the proletariat can be truly solved. It is here that the objective preconditions of historical consciousness are assembled, opening the door to the realization of that active direct communication which marks the end of all specialization, all hierarchy, and all separation and. . .to which existing conditions are transformed into the conditions of unity.³³⁶

With the workers' councils in place the S. I. delegates asked for "the abolition of the university, the commodity, the class-system, wage labor, the spectacle, the expropriation of all property and power, and the recreation of a federation of autonomous councils"³³⁷. Within the Sorbonne's workers' council, the S. I. and Les Enragés began to issue leaflets and telegrams. They sent daily telegrams saying:

Shake in your shoes bureaucrats. . .the International Power of the Workers Councils will soon wipe you out. . .humanity will not be happy until the last bureaucrat is hung with the guts of the last capitalist. . .long live the struggle. . .long live the 1956 councilist insurrection of Budapest . . .(Occupation Committee of the Autonomous and Popular Sorbonne).³³⁸

They also communicated with other occupied factories, asking them to form committees and organize themselves into their own councils. The S. I. gave a radio address on May 16th, instructing people to occupy all factories and to form workers' councils. In the address, the S. I. proclaimed:

³³⁶ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 86-87.

³³⁷ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 428.

³³⁸ *Ibid*, 429.

Comrades, Considering that the Sud-Aviation factory at Nantes has been occupied for two days by the workers and students of that city, and today the movement is spreading to several factories. . . The Sorbonne Occupation Committee calls for the immediate occupation of all the factories in France and the formation of Workers Councils. Comrades, spread and reproduce this appeal as quickly as possible.³³⁹

However, after two days in the Sorbonne council on May 17th the S. I. and Les Enragés walked out of the Sorbonne council claiming that it was too timid and divided to seize the moment. Consequently, the dozen S. I. and Enragés members formed the Council for Maintaining the Occupation which continued to operate until June 15th. In its new council, the S. I. was able to spread thousands of posters, manifestoes, and comic strips across the world. An example is the May 30th manifestoes which stated that:

What we have done in France. . . is haunting Europe and will soon threaten the ruling classes of the world, from the bureaucrats of Moscow and Peking to the Millionaires of Washington and Tokyo. Just as we have made Paris dance, the international proletariat will again take up its assault on the capitals of all nations, on all the citadels of alienation. The occupation of factories and public buildings throughout the country has not only blocked the functioning of the economy, it has brought about a general questioning of society.³⁴⁰

The concept of workers' councils and their organization was an important theoretical and practical contribution by the S. I. that buttressed the events of May 68. These councils were both widely organized throughout France and designed as open, unspecialized, non-hierarchical spaces where everyone could participate in direct communication. However these same aspects are what

³³⁹ Situationist International, "Communique 1968," *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knapp (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 343.

³⁴⁰ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 429.

most likely led to their dissolution. (more will be said on this in Chapter 5)

Nonetheless, with France paralyzed and workers' councils spreading, President de Gaulle was forced to announce on May 24th that a referendum would take place and that all the social reform requested would soon be implemented. Despite these concessions, students and workers were not appeased citing that de Gaulle "waited three weeks before announcing in five minutes that he's going to try in a month to do what he hasn't managed to achieve in ten years"³⁴¹. In response to de Gaulle's speech, there were overnight riots in Paris where people shouted "Adieu, de Gaulle!"³⁴², built barricades and violently fought with police. The effects of these riots resulted in 795 arrests and 456 injured.

Despite the riots on May 27th, unions, employer's associations and the government reached an agreement that raised the minimum wage, cut working hours, reduced the age of retirement, and allowed people the right to organize. In spite of these concessions, workers and students refused to go back to work and on May 29th with leftist political parties calling for his resignation, de Gaulle gave in to their demands and left France, but only for a matter of hours. During his brief departure, de Gaulle met with General Massu, commander of the French forces in Germany, where a demoralized de Gaulle was eventually reassured by the General that his forces would not abandon the republic. Recalling the event, de Gaulle stated, "for the first time in my life, I had a moment of weakness. I'm not proud of myself"³⁴³. With his renewed support, on May 30th, de Gaulle announced that he was not stepping down, but that an election would be held at

³⁴¹ Keith Reader, The May 68 Events in France (London, England: Macmillan Publications, 1993) 14.

³⁴² Ibid, 14.

³⁴³ Ibid, 16.

the end of June and that if needed, he would use harsher methods to suppress the uprisings:

I shall not step down; I have a mandate from the people and I shall carry it out . . . the intimidation, poison and tyranny of organized groups [will stop]. . . If this situation continues I shall have to use other methods than immediate national elections. . . the power that imposed itself at a time of national despair. . . would be that of totalitarian Communism. . . The Republic will not abdicate, the people will rally. Progress, peace and independence will triumph along with liberty.³⁴⁴

With this forceful speech, which again alludes to a communist scheme to seize control, the uprisings eventually dissolved themselves. Firstly, de Gaulle slowly gained the support of the majority. On May 31st, mass demonstrations were held in support of de Gaulle. On June 1st, gas stations were re-supplied with fuel, the minimum wage increase was implemented, vacation time was increased to five weeks, there was a ten percent increase in private and public sector salaries and a progressive return to the forty hour work week. University tuitions were permanently frozen and new universities were to be built. However, although the promise of social reforms was guaranteed, the government and the economic system currently in place had to remain, as de Gaulle stated; “Des réformes, Oui!, le chienlit, Non!”³⁴⁵. Furthermore, on June 7th, de Gaulle in a televised interview yet again blamed the uprisings on anarchists and communists groups:

Cette explosion a été provoquée par quelques groupes qui se révoltent contre la société moderne, contre la société de consommation, contre la société mécanique, qu’elle soit communiste à l’Est, ou qu’elle soit capitaliste à l’Ouest. Des groupes qui ne savent pas du tout d’ailleurs par quoi ils la remplaceraient, mais qui se délectent de négation, de destruction, de violence, d’anarchie, qui arborent le drapeau noir.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Ibid. 18.

³⁴⁵ Ibid. 3.

³⁴⁶ René Viénet, Enragés et Situationistes dans le Mouvement des Occupations (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 166.

According to de Gaulle, the uprisings were caused by anarchist and communist groups and not the workers and the students who had always been the main participants. Once again we see the dominant hegemony, embodied in de Gaulle's statements, marginalizing and trivializing the uprisings and various oppositional groups through the mass media, stating that these groups did not strive to implement an alternative means of organizing society, but instead wanted society's total destruction. Consequently, on June 17th, with support for de Gaulle increasing, all occupation committees were evicted, workers slowly returned to work, and clemency was awarded to most participants. The June election saw the right wing parties winning an overwhelming majority, while the leftist parties lost 61 seats and the communists 39 seats. However, in an extraordinary referendum held in late April 1969, in which de Gaulle asked voters to decide if he was to continue as France's president, de Gaulle was narrowly defeated and immediately resigned the following day. As a result of this, Georges Pompidou was elected as France's new president on June 16, 1969.³⁴⁷

After the May 68 uprisings, the S. I. argued that the uprisings had validated their notion that spontaneous/festive revolution could occur in highly developed industrial nations. According to Debord, May 68 was a festive/spontaneous revolution that had spawned not from economic crisis, but from people's genuine feelings of alienation and disillusionment within their everyday lives. He stated in late 1968 that:

³⁴⁷ Keith Reader, The May 68 Events in France (London, England: Macmillan Publications, 1993) 18-19.

The movement was a rediscovery of collective and individual history, a recognition of the possibility of intervening in history, an awareness of participating in an irreversible event ("Nothing will ever be the same again"). . . The occupation movement was plainly a rejection of alienated labor; it [i.e. May 68] was a festival, a game, a real presence of real people and real time.³⁴⁸

For Debord, these festive uprisings allowed people to openly express their disgust for the current bureaucratic and economic system. May 68 was a sign that "capitalist abundance. . .has failed"³⁴⁹. Likewise René Viénet wrote that the most important thing about the uprisings was that "commodity time stopped. . .[and that] instantly, the noise. . . for a few weeks sounded like the beginning of a new language"³⁵⁰. Although May 68 would ultimately lead to questions about the effectiveness of festive/spontaneous revolution for achieving political change, for the S. I., May 68 temporally validated their notion that spontaneous/festive revolution could occur in highly developed industrial nations. After the uprisings, the S. I. sarcastically quoted Henri Lefebvre's 1967 critique of its spontaneous/festive revolution. This was the S. I.'s way of rebutting Lefebvre's criticism and reiterating that a spontaneous/festive revolution had occurred during May 68. Lefebvre had stated:

Do they [i.e. the S. I.] really imagine that one fine day or some decisive evening people will look at each other and say, 'Enough! We are fed up with working and being bored. Let's put an end to this!' And that they will thereupon proceed into endless Festival and start creating situations? Maybe it happened once, at dawn on 18 March 1871, but that particular set of circumstances can never recur.³⁵¹

³⁴⁸ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 430.

³⁴⁹ Keith Reader, The May 68 Events in France (London, England: Macmillan Publications, 1993) 51.

³⁵⁰ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 430.

³⁵¹ Anselm Jappe, Guy Debord (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999) 100-101.

In the eyes of the S. I., May 68 had rebutted Lefebvre's critique and validated its notion of festive/spontaneous revolution in several ways. Firstly, May 68 had produced the largest strike in history, with ten million workers involved in occupations, violence and demonstrations and where for several weeks every agency of government and economic authority abdicated its role. Secondly, May 68 had spawned a festival like atmosphere in which, according to the S. I., there was "a feeling that everything [was] possible"³⁵². Thirdly, May 68 had expressed a negation of capitalism that effected everyone's daily experiences. Anselm Jappe states in his book, Guy Debord, that May 68 resonated in every crevice of everyday life:

[May 68] affected individuals in their most intimate and everyday being. . . [showing] beyond doubt that a very large number of people yearned inwardly for a completely different life and that this desire, once it found expression, could quickly bring a modern state to its knees: exactly what the S. I. had always said.³⁵³

Because of this, according to French theorist Pascal Dumontier, one is hard pressed to fully understand May 68 without acknowledging the S. I.'s influence. He argues in his book, Les Situationniste et Mai 68, that the S. I.'s ideas concerning festive/spontaneous revolution and the subversion of capitalism's new alienations are crucial aspects of the May 68 uprisings that cannot be divorced from the event without foregoing a full understanding. According to Dumontier, the S. I.'s analysis and its practices were widely used during May 68:

The Situationists' conception of play [or *détournement*] . . . theoretically, . . . [was] a way

³⁵² *Ibid*, 101.

³⁵³ *Ibid*, 101.

of breaking with the alienation of everyday life practically, it [i.e. *détournement*] develop[ed] the tactical and strategic sense necessary to the revolutionary struggle. From this point of view, May 68 [was] with its original slogans, its outbursts of spontaneity and its extremist demands, . . . the “revolutionary fête” of the Situationists. In light of their ideas, it is easier to understand the most baffling aspects of the May movement.³⁵⁴

For this reason, it is important to mention that although May 68 was violent, with many riots and clashes with police, it was also the expression of symbolic violence. Firstly there were few deaths. According to the government’s last accounts there were only two³⁵⁵. Secondly, the barricades were tactically useless other than as symbols of negation. Even a media commentator remarked after the May 10th night of the barricades that “all night they played at war. On both sides, though nothing was said, everybody knew that the ultimate limit would not be reached, the point of intentional killing”³⁵⁶. Although the commentators’ statement can be viewed as an attempt to marginalize and trivialize the May 68 uprisings, we cannot forget that Debord also referred to May 68 as “a festival [and] a game”³⁵⁷.

Nevertheless, Debord’s view raises an important question about May 68 in the sense that if May 68 was an experiment in non-hierarchical forms of political organization with the workers’ councils then why did it ultimately fail to sustain itself? This leads into another question that arises from May 68: is festive/spontaneous revolution a good means for political transformation? Henri Lefebvre also summarized these conundrums in 1971 with the question, “can one conceive a

³⁵⁴Pascal Dumontier, *Les Situationnistes et Mai 68* (Paris: Gerard Lebovici, 1990) 222-223.

³⁵⁵ Keith Reader, *The May 68 Events in France* (London, England: Macmillan Publications, 1993) 18.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁵⁷ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 430.

revolution [or political change] in the name of difference?"³⁵⁸. These crucial questions followed the S. I. as it struggled in the following years to organize itself in a non-hierarchical form and to explain why May 68 failed. Unfortunately, the S. I. would also dissolve in 1972.

Conclusion

Although May 68 had various perspectives, due to the limited focus of this study, I strictly concentrated on the events and actions surrounding the Situationist International. Despite the fact that this chapter briefly dealt with the beginning, middle and end of the events of May 68, examining the student uprisings, the general strike across France, the occupation of the Sorbonne and the government concessions, the focus was always the S. I.'s position within these events, its thoughts, its contributions and its relationship with Les Enragés and the mass media. Examining the S. I.'s writings, speeches and actions before and during May 68, this chapter attempted to show that the S. I.'s theory and its practices, such as détournement, graffiti slogans, workers councils and festive/spontaneous revolution, buttressed the uprisings. As a result of its actions and its ideas, the S. I. influenced debates on power, capitalism, everyday life and revolution in the sense that May 68 temporally validated their principles and their notion that a festive/spontaneous revolution could occur in highly developed industrial nations. However, due to its influence on the events of May 68, the S. I. was increasingly marginalized and trivialized in the mass media, as

³⁵⁸ Rob Shields, Love and Struggle (New York: Routledge, 1999) 108.

newspapers and various televised news casts continuously downplayed the students and the workers' participation in the uprisings in favor of portraying the S. I. and other oppositional/counter-cultural groups as the main cause behind the various revolts.

Thus, in the next chapter, I will examine the S. I.'s actions after May 68. I will argue that the movement dissolved because it exhausted itself trying to defend its theory and trying to organize itself into a non-hierarchical organization. In addition, the S. I. dissolved because it was succumbing to the logic of its own socio-economic critique, becoming a media commodity and an object of contemplation that continued to be marginalized in the mass media. Nevertheless, the S. I.'s commodification, which was occurring because of its rising popularity, influenced debates on capitalism in the sense that its own commodification acknowledged capitalism's profound recuperative powers.

Chapter 5

The Situationist International's Dissolution

First and foremost, May 68 marked both the pinnacle of the S. I.'s activity and the beginning of its decline. As noted earlier, the S. I.'s place in history is closely tied to the way the May 68 uprisings temporally validated their theses. In fact after May 68, the S. I. would forever refer to the events of May as "le joli mois de Mai"³⁵⁹ since the May uprisings had popularized its theory. The radical student alliance based in London sent an address to the French workers and the S. I. articulating the influence that the events of May 68 was having on other struggles:

We too have felt the blows of the police clubs and the effects of tear-gas; the betrayals of our so-called leaders are not unknown to us. The sum of these experiences has proved to us the necessity of joining in solidarity with the living struggles against oppressive structures in world society. . . But you, comrades, have succeeded in pushing that struggle beyond a questioning of the class nature of the university to a struggle united with the workers which has as its goal the complete capitulation of capitalist society. . . Comrades, you have reanimated the traditions of 1871. . . you have given international socialism a new force.³⁶⁰

Additionally, the coordinating committee of the student strike at Columbia University published a treatise in New York in June 1968 that commended the workers and students for revitalizing the international socialist movement.

³⁵⁹ Anselm Jappe, Guy Debord (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999) 100.

³⁶⁰ René Viénet, "Perspectives for World Revolution after the Occupations Movement," Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement May 68 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1969) 1.

For more than two weeks twelve million French workers and Students have led a mass general strike against the same conditions which confront us in America. . . [The events] give new life to the international movement, which is already manifesting itself in Germany, Spain, Italy, Japan, and even here in the United-States. . . Their fight is our fight. The workers and students in France are looking to us.³⁶¹

By mid-July in 1968, organizations had begun to form in various nations around the world.

Consequently, immediately after the uprisings, the S. I. grew in strength with an increasing wave of external supporters dubbed “Pro-Situs” and an increasing wave of new members that were admitted into its own ranks. As a result, the S. I. set-up various factions in Italy, Scandinavia and America, where each published their own S. I. journals. In addition to this, the Situationist International’s critique became widely read throughout Europe and the world. One journalist even went so far as to remark that Debord’s book, The Society of the Spectacle, was “the *Capital* of the new generation”³⁶². However, despite its rise in popularity, the S. I. was suffering a crisis, in part due to its rise in membership, a series of resignations and some inconsistencies in its quest for non-hierarchical forms of organization. Hence as a result, in early 1972 the S. I. disbanded. At the time, Debord concluded that the movement had run its course. Its ideas had become widely known and its practices had been implemented in various struggles across the globe. He states in a 1972 article “Theses on the Situationist International and its Time”, that:

The Situationist International[’s]. . .collapse. . .has begun under our very eyes. . . [But] the theory, the style, and the example of the S. I. have today been adopted by thousands of revolutionaries in the principal advanced countries. . . Books and texts published by the

³⁶¹ Ibid, 2.

³⁶² Anselm Jappe, Guy Debord (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999) 102.

S. I. are translated and commented upon everywhere. Its demands have been posted in Milan as well as in the University of Coimbra. From California to Calabria, from Scotland to Spain, from Belfast to Leningrad, its principal theses are being spread around anonymously or have been proclaimed in open struggles . . . [However] an inevitable part of the historical success of the S. I. led to it in turn to be contemplated. . . as soon as the S. I. had made itself known . . . the S. I. . . became outdated.³⁶³

For these reasons, this chapter will examine in detail the S. I.'s dissolution. Firstly, the S. I. exhausted itself trying to organize the movement into a non-hierarchical organization. This aspect is closely related to the S. I.'s rising membership. Secondly, the S. I.'s dissolved itself due to the fact that it was succumbing to the logic of its own socio-economic critique. It was becoming a media commodity and an object of contemplation that continued to be marginalized in the mass media. Despite this, the S. I.'s marginalization and commodification influenced debates on capitalism in the sense that its own marginalization and commodification acknowledged capitalism's profound recuperative powers.

The Situationist International's Dissolution

First and foremost, after May 68, with its burgeoning popularity, the S. I. organized various new factions across Europe and in America. These new factions placed added organizational pressures on the S. I., who attempted to reorganize itself in an open democracy, akin to its workers councils. After a conference in 1969, attended by various International

³⁶³ Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, "Theses on the Situationist International and its Time," The Veritable Split in the International (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1972) 1-9.

delegates of the S. I., some provisional organizational statutes were published, outlining how the S. I. was to be organized. Firstly, it was agreed that all members of the S. I. were to be conceived as equals, where each had to participate in decision making. Secondly, the S. I. organized itself into national sections as these divisions recognized geographical and cultural differences. Thirdly, each national section was sovereign in its own region and had to organize its own finances and structure itself akin to the other sections. Fourthly, these various S. I. sections were to meet on a regular basis to discuss current issues and S. I. matters. The statutes stated that:

1. The S. I. is an international association of individuals who, are equal in all aspects of its democratic management. Majority decisions are executed by everyone. . . 2. The “national” criterion is understood in both geographical and cultural terms. 3. The general assembly of all the members of the S. I. is the only decision making power over all theoretical and practical choices. 4. Each national section, on its own responsibility and within the general guidelines adapted by the entire S. I., democratically decides on all its activities and tactics on its own terrain. 5. Each national section will organize its own complete financial autonomy. 6. A general conference of the S. I. should meet as often as possible with all members.³⁶⁴

However, despite these organizational principles, the S. I. was fraught with continuous organizational disputes. First there was anger over high apathy and absenteeism. For example in a pamphlet titled “Operations Within the French Section After October 1969,” Debord argued that the French members of the S. I. had become complacent and apathetic, participating very little in the journal publications and meetings:

In other sections, not only is there more equal involvement in debates and writing, but

³⁶⁴ Situationist International, Provisional Statutes of the S. I. (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1969) 1-2.

there is more real interest in our theory and its uses: there is more personal activity, more reading, more ideas. The French appear to be resting on their old historical laurels. . .Hardly anyone has bothered to educate themselves at all. This inertia must be extracted by the roots. . .Every meeting should become a sort of conference for the section. . .From November, everyone should be in Paris just about all the time, in order to participate in every meeting, regardless of length. . . as a general rule, the S. I. must no longer be told that an outside obligation prevents a certain member from being present at a scheduled meeting; outside obligations must be told that a more pressing obligation prevents any other engagement.³⁶⁵

Due to this complacency, Debord was continually forced to undertake greater writing and editorial duties. It should be noted that following May 68, the French S. I. only published one journal in late 1969, after which Debord's relinquished his editorial duties. In a letter written before the final publication of the S. I. journal, Debord outlined that he was abdicating his role as editor and that the French journal needed an overhaul.

It is. . .necessary to change the present form of the French journal. . . This overhaul should bring about every opportunity for collaboration in equality, which [is] certainly not achievable with the specialized qualification acquired by two or three of us in the handling of the old formula. Consequently, following the release of issue 12. . .I will no longer assume responsibility, legal as well as editorial, for the "direction" of the journal. The old revolutionary principle of the rotation of task is. . .justification for this decision.³⁶⁶

Unfortunately, after Debord abdicated his role as editor, no one volunteered to edit and continue the journal. Consequently the French S. I. journal, which had been in operation since 1957, came to an end. In addition to this inner turmoil within the French section of S. I., there were further conflicts between the various international factions concerning decision making and the

³⁶⁵ Guy Debord, Operation Within the French Section After October 1969 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1969) 1.

³⁶⁶ Guy Debord, Letter to the French Section of the S. I. (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1969) 1.

organizational format of the movement. During a conflict between the French and the American section over the American section's expulsion of a member, the American section left the Situationist International citing that the movement had become hierarchically organized with the French S. I. holding authority. The conflict began when the American section decided to expel one of its members due to the fact that he was not informing the group about his dealings in Europe. The French S. I. vetoed the expulsion stating that no member had ever been expelled for not informing headquarters of his dealings. The French S. I. argued that individual members are autonomous and not continually subject to scrutiny from other members. The American section replied that under the statutes of organization the French S. I. had no authority over the American sections internal dealings, since it was sovereign within its own region. After continuous conflict, the American section resigned from the Situationist International stating that

The elements of this problem. . . [stemmed] from the internal functioning of the organization. . . The S. I. no longer is what it appears to be, at any level,. . .it [is]. . . a false revolutionary organization. . .that [initially] refuse[d] to reproduce with itself any of the prevailing hierarchical conditions [within society]. . .Yet the S. I. create[d] implicit hierarchical conditions. . .[where] hierarchical relations emerged [with] the presence of unequal individuals. . . [who] assumed the role of decision and execution for all. This we have identified. . .as the centralist practice of the Situationist International.³⁶⁷

These conflicts stem from the S. I.'s organizational form, the workers councils. This organizational form of open direct democracy requires continuous participation from members in meetings and in decision making which places tremendous pressure on members whose

³⁶⁷ Robert Chasse and Bruce Elwell, "A Critique of the Situationist International as a Revolutionary Organization," A Field Study in the Dwindling Force of Cognition, Where it is Expected Least (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1970) 1-3.

geographical distance prevented them from attending every gathering. Also, as I have shown with the American section, when one adopts a non-hierarchical form of organization and there is a disagreement, no one or group can override the other's authority. This type of organizational structure almost always leads to irreconcilable divisions between various members and various sections if methods of exercising authority are not well defined.

The second main event contributing to the dissolution of the S. I. was the resignation of some French members and a subsequent break between the French and Italian sections. The French S. I. suffered resignations from some its longtime members, most notably Mustapha Khayati and Raoul Vaneigem. Their resignations stemmed from the fact that the movement was preoccupied with administrative matters. Khayati resigned on October 1st, 1969, stating that he wanted to participate in more radical elements of the revolutionary struggle: "I feel a certain obligation to participate alongside the more radical elements of the revolutionary crisis currently taking shape in the Arab nations . . . I hereby tender my resignation"³⁶⁸. Vaneigem resigned in 1970, claiming that there was not a sense of community anymore in the Situationist International. More direct and merciless in his letter of resignation than Khayati, Vaneigem stated that

If it is true that the group has never been but the sum of the capabilities and the weaknesses. . . of its members, there is in the moment which concerns us no apparent community. . . How could what was impassioning in the consciousness of a common project change itself into a malaise of being together? . . . Consider me henceforth resigned, with the consequences, which I accept, of never again seeing one another.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁸ Mustapha Khayati, Letter of Resignation (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1969) 1.

³⁶⁹ Raoul Vaneigem, Letter of Resignation from the Situationist International (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1970) 1.

These administrative difficulties continued when the Italian section was expelled from the S. I., “for having gravely failed the organizational rules of the Situationist International. . .by [promoting] a certain violence [i.e. murder]. . .[that] cannot [be] accepted. . . [and] exercised on any occasion”³⁷⁰. Once again, we see inherent problems in the S. I.’s organizational form of workers councils in the sense that it can clearly be seen that authority is centralized in the French section of the Situationist International. This ultimately contradicts its ideas of a decentralized, non-hierarchical organization. Even Debord admitted in 1970, that workers councils had organizational problems and that because of this, the S. I. was increasingly preoccupied with administrative matters:

In the past four months, for the first time, the S. I.’s administrative and disciplinary side has clearly taken precedence over creativity and experimentation. The immediate reversal of the relationship between these forces is needed if the S. I. is to have any justification for maintaining itself. . . “where the S. I. is lacking is that interpersonal relations have fatally become our only practice”. . . In spite of . . .enormous historical and programmatic interest, the workers councils of the past were obviously insufficient as experiments, and real councilist organizations are still a long way from coming to fruition.³⁷¹

This remarkable admission by Debord acknowledges that workers councils were not functioning within the S. I. and that this method of organization was a long way from being successful. This is a far cry from his idyllic statement that the implementation of workers councils “marks the end of all specialization, all hierarchy. . .[where] existing conditions are transformed ‘into the conditions

³⁷⁰ Guy Debord, “Notes to Serve as a History of the S. I. from 1969 to 1971,” The Veritable Split in the International (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1972) 2.

³⁷¹ Guy Debord, Notes for a Joint Meeting of the French and Italian Section (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1970) 1.

of unity”³⁷². A few months before the S. I. disbanded, Debord, disillusioned with this method of organization, stated that “our organizational formula has [the] sole fault of not being real, it is obvious that we must at all costs make it real or else renounce it and devise another style of organization. . . We must. . . stop pretending”³⁷³. Sadly, the S. I. stopped pretending in its workers councils and dissolved itself in 1972. The failure of this non-hierarchical form of organization was one of the main causes of the S. I.’s dissolution.

However, if its workers council experiment was breaking-up the movement internally, it was the S. I.’s rising popularity and the mass media that was breaking it up externally. In fact, the S. I. was succumbing to the logic of its own socio-economic critique. It was becoming a media commodity and an object of contemplation that continued to be marginalized and trivialized in the mass media. For example in 1972, just before the S. I. disbanded, Debord wrote that the S. I. had become a media commodity:

The negative force [i.e. the S. I.] that was set in motion against the spectacle found itself slavishly admired by spectators as well. . . Surrounded by silence, The S. I. had no support, and many of its elements of its work were to a certain extent constantly recuperated against it. . . The S. I.’s theory has penetrated the masses. It can no longer be liquidated in primitive solitude [but] it can still be falsified.³⁷⁴

This is exactly what happened. According to Debord, the various supporters of the S. I. that became known as “Pro-Situs” had only incorporated the S. I.’s radical critique and not its appeal

³⁷² Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 87.

³⁷³ Guy Debord, “Remarks on the S. I. Today,” Situationist International Anthology, trans. Ken Knapp (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 365.

³⁷⁴ Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, “Theses on the Situationist International and its Time,” The Veritable Split in the International (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1972) 7.

for direct political action. As a result, these spectators continuously commodified the S. I. and turned its once revolutionary theory into an ideology because they abdicated the core of the S. I.'s theory, revolution. For example, Debord states:

Those who only contemplate today's revolutionary ideas and tasks, and particularly the S. I., with . . . fanaticism. . . principally manifest the fact that at the moment when the ensemble of society is forced to become revolutionary, a vast sector does not yet know how to be revolutionary. . . The Pro-Situ milieu represents the theory of the S. I. that has become ideology. . . The Pro-Situ possesses nothing but its good intentions, and wants to engage in illusory consumption of the [S. I.] . . . To understand the Pro-Situs in other words, to combat them--was a prime necessity for the S. I. . . At the same time, we have to understand how this this image of the Situationist. . . could have been formed.³⁷⁵

For Debord, this image of the S. I. was formed by the mass media, who prior and during May 68 referred to the S. I. as a mysterious anarchist group that masterminded the events of May 68. In fact, even a year after the May 68 uprisings, the newspaper, Le Monde, described the S. I. as "ultra-leftist radicals. . . [who] were eager to destroy both the democratic regime and self-management"³⁷⁶. In response to these accusations, Debord argued that "this fight. . . was not waged in order for the S. I. to become a authority or a power. . . [it was waged] for the renewal of class war"³⁷⁷. Nevertheless, Debord did acknowledge that the mass media was turning him into a media star and turning the S. I. into an "aristocracy. . . with [an] appearance of hierarchical

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 8.

³⁷⁶ René Viénet, "Perspective for World Revolution after the Occupation Movement," Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement May 68 (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1969) 3.

³⁷⁷ Guy Debord and Sanguinetti, "Theses on the Situationist International and its Time," The Veritable Split in the International (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1972) 8.

valorization, which [became] its . . . title”³⁷⁸. In a letter written to the French S. I. in 1969, Debord recognized that the mass media was turning him into a media star and that because of this he would remain in the shadows:

With many of our opponents being inclined to stupidly present me as the S. I.’s “leader”, I believe that [because of] those outside the group who would turn us into stars, I should be kept in [the] shadows as much as possible. It would be even worse, from an internal point of view, for a trust accorded automatically by the S. I. to end up lending credence to the illusion that I might have an irreplaceable role in anything.³⁷⁹

This letter confirms that the mass media was exerting a powerful influence on the S. I. in the sense that Debord was being depicted as the group’s leader, which consequently also undermined the S. I.’s internal structure as a non-hierarchical organization. The mass media’s constant depiction of the S. I. as a anarchist group bent on total destruction was marginalizing the group in the sense that their visions of a new society based on the creation of situations was also being undermined. In addition to this, the S. I. was blamed for various bombings in Milan as police officers, according to Debord, created a public display secretly detonating bombs and then searching for the bombers who were supposedly S. I. members:

The Italian section of the S. I. succeeded. . . in practical circumstances. . . notably in escaping from the police officers who had made a show of looking for them after the explosion of the bombs that the secret services of the Italian State utilized in December 1969 at the Plaza Fontana in Milan to shatter or retard the movement of wildcat strikes

³⁷⁸ Ibid, 8.

³⁷⁹ Guy Debord, Letter to the French Section of the S. I. (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1969) 1.

that had come to the point of constituting a menace of immediate subversion to society.³⁸⁰

Although Debord's statement borders on a conspiracy against the S. I., his statement taken into consideration with the other examples of the S. I.'s trivialization, acknowledges that there was a certain marginalization process occurring. However this process was primarily meant to reassert the dominant hegemony and to de-legitimize the Situationist International and its oppositional ideas.

Another example of this marginalization process is Debord's statement that "the S. I.'s theory can now be often misunderstood or improperly translated, as sometimes happened with the theory of Marx and Hegel"³⁸¹. For instance in a book published in 1972, titled, The French Communist Party versus the Students, Richard Johnson states that the S. I.'s innovations were not novel and that its theory was unfounded because it criticized capitalism solely on the fact that it was a giant spectacle.

Their innovations. . . were not at all novel. . . they condemned capitalism, not because it produced poverty and exploitation, but because it was a gigantic "spectacle" that spiritually enslaved its population, who were both its actors and its audience. . . When all [is] said and done, the "theory" of the situationists [is] rather uninspiring. . . the situationists described their "situation" but present no real, strategic perspective for its transformation.³⁸²

³⁸⁰ Guy Debord, "Notes to Serve as a History of the S. I. from 1969 to 1971," The Veritable Split in the International (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1972) 2.

³⁸¹ Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, "Theses on the Situationist International and its Time," The Veritable Split in the International (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1972) 7.

³⁸² Richard Johnson, French Communist Party versus the Students (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 85-88.

Firstly, it must be understood that Debord's "spectacle" is not just spiritual enslavement but is first and foremost based on poverty and exploitation. Debord states that "at the root of the spectacle. . . lies. . . divisions of labor"³⁸³ which clearly grounds his spectacle on Marx's notion that capitalism stems from the exploitation and the alienation of human labor. Secondly, it must be understood that Debord's "spectacle" only describes the new poverty and the new exploitations that have arisen within highly developed capitalist nations. For Debord, "the spectacle is simply the economic realm developing for itself at once a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers. . . the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image"³⁸⁴. Hence, Debord's spectacle is more than just spiritual enslavement; it is both economic and ideological, physical and mental enslavement. In this respect, Johnson fails to see that the spectacle expresses both physical and mental alienation.

Johnson's broad generalized statement that the S. I.'s theory is uninspiring and its innovations are not novel only serves to reassert the dominant hegemony. In fact Johnson does not even support his statement with any empirical evidence, he only states that "the task of forging. . . [the S. I.'s] solutions was left to Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the principal ideologue of the May revolt,"³⁸⁵. However, Johnson forgets that the Cohn-Bendit and Les Enragés relied on the S. I.'s theory and its practices such as détournement and its graffiti slogans, (as I have mentioned in the previous chapter). In addition, it is important to note that the S. I.'s theory and practices were inspiring enough to influence other movements throughout Europe at the time. For example

³⁸³ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 18.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-24.

³⁸⁵ Richard Johnson, French Communist Party versus the Students (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 88.

movements in Italy and England, which I have already mentioned, displayed great admiration towards the Situationist International and the events of May 68. As well, the S. I. did have an extensive influence on subsequent oppositional/counter-cultural movements and on popular culture, which I will explore in my conclusion. Also, according to Anselm Jappe's 1999 book, Guy Debord, Debord's and the S. I.'s theory have become widely read in academia in recent years. However, Jappe also observes that this has been compounded by trivialization and marginalization, as we see from Johnson's generalized analysis. Jappe states:

Guy Debord. . . has fallen rapturously into the welcoming arms of academia or of television. . . For a long time, in fact, the police showed far more interest in him than did the agencies normally responsible for the diffusion of ideas. . . theories developed by Debord and his Situationist friends. . . [have left] their mark, despite all obstacles. . . Since then another way of obscuring Debord's thinking has come into play, namely trivialization: there must be very few present-day authors whose ideas have been so widely applied in distorted form, and generally without attribution. . . that we live in a society of the spectacle is acknowledged by almost everyone--by television producers, by president Jacques Chirac. . . [but] the term[s]. . . details are rarely supplied.³⁸⁶

According to Jappe, no idea of Debord's theory has been more obscured than his notion of the "spectacle". Hence, he states that to reduce Debord's "spectacle" to a theory of the mass media is subversive to both his and the S. I.'s theory. For Jappe, Debord's critique cannot be properly grasped unless we understand that his theory of the spectacle is first and foremost located within Marxist thought. It must be understood that Debord and the S. I. attempted to revolutionize everyday life and that their theory of the mass media was always foremost a Marxist critique of

³⁸⁶ Anselm Jappe, Guy Debord (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999) 1-2.

capitalism's new stage of development:

When Marx's theories are reduced to simple economic doctrine concerning the supposedly inevitable pauperization of the proletariat, it is easy enough to trumpet the error of his thought. . . A similar intent informs the presentation of Debord's ideas as nothing more than a theory of the mass media. . . Debord's theories cannot be properly grasped unless they are first properly located within Marxist thought. . . placing all the emphasis on his [media analysis]. . . [plays] down Debord's theoretico-practical activity. . . and ultimately [accords] him no significance for the present time. . . [His] notion of the spectacle. . . is based on commodity production and its corollary, the fetishism of commodities. . . the real significance of this. . . concept. . . constitutes a key to. . . understanding . . . the world today, where the results of human activity are so antagonistic to humanity. . . that they now threaten it with extinction.³⁸⁷

Hence, to label the S. I. and Debord's critique as a theory of mass media is false. As a result, Johnson's generalized assertions that the S. I.'s and Debord's theory only concerns itself with spiritual enslavement and the mass media, trivializes and marginalizes their critique. The fact that Debord has been "depicted as a kind of less well-known Marshall McLuhan"³⁸⁸ only skews Debord's theory and the S. I.'s political actions, and their influences on subsequent movements. This fact also illustrates how the dominant hegemony marginalizes, trivializes and recuperates oppositional/counter-cultural movements and their subversive theories by reducing them to quick catch phrases and words such as "the spectacle".

Additionally, the S. I.'s trivialization, marginalization and commodification reiterates the profound recuperative powers that capitalism's dominant hegemony exercises through the mass media. Since its rise, the mass media has had an enormous influence on oppositional/counter-

³⁸⁷ Ibid. 1-3.

³⁸⁸ Ibid. 2.

cultural movements. These movements have had to increasingly contend with the media's skewed portrayal of their goals and their identities, which in most accounts attempts to reassert the dominant hegemony. According to Todd Gitlin, "as the mass media have suffused social life, they have become crucial fields for the definition of social meaning"³⁸⁹ and because of this they continue to play an integral role in sustaining the dominant hegemony. As a result, oppositional/counter-cultural movements are continuously caught in dilemma. Either they content themselves by remaining outside the dominant hegemony, where their message will continue to be marginalized and trivialized by the mass media; or they may enter the political arena, and biding that their message and actions are reasonable, they may achieve moderate success and political legitimacy, but at the cost of assimilation and the continued rule of the dominant hegemony. For example, Gitlin states:

An opposition movement is caught in a fundamental and inescapable dilemma. If it stands outside the dominant realm of discourse, it is. . . consigned to marginality and political irrelevance [by the media]. . . if on the other hand, it plays by conventional political rules in order to acquire an image of credibility. . . that is, its leaders are well-mannered, its actions well-ordered, it is liable to be assimilated into the hegemonic political world view. . . and its oppositional edge is blunted. . . But it would be mistaken to think that the established order simply sheds or absorbs radical challenges while remaining the same. . . [the] hegemonic ideology shift[s] with circumstance. . . the system. . . is transformed.³⁹⁰

Of course, Debord and the S. I. always maintained a stern opposition to the dominant capitalist hegemony, fighting against any form of recuperation and reintegration. As a result, they did suffer

³⁸⁹ Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching (Berkeley California: University of California Press, 1980) 292.

³⁹⁰ Ibid, 291.

marginalization and trivialization at the hands of the mass media and other hegemonic capitalist institutions, which consequently resulted in the S. I.'s dissolution. However, as I will show in the conclusion and as Gitlin states, "the ghostly aura of a movement lives on to inspire, and haunt, the next generation of reformers"³⁹¹. But, contrary to Gitlin's argument that "the radicalism of movements do not survive"³⁹², it is this very radicalism that fuels subsequent movements. Chiefly, radical movements such as the S. I. continue to inspire because first and foremost they argue that there are fundamental irreconcilable defects in the capitalist system that destroy, exploit and enslave human beings. Secondly, these oppositional/counter-cultural movements continue to inspire because it is increasingly apparent that the only way to subvert a dominant hegemony is through the forceful appropriation of the means of production; any other compromise, while it may extend and influence the parameters of the dominant hegemony, only sustains and buttresses the core organizational and hierarchical structures, and principles of the dominant hegemony. Consequently as Marx argues and as Debord states "*things have. . . reached the state where individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only in order to affirm themselves, but, in short, to assure their very existence [!]*"³⁹³.

Conclusion

³⁹¹ Ibid, 291.

³⁹² Ibid, 291.

³⁹³ Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, "Theses on the Situationist International and its Time," The Veritable Split the International (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1972) 5.

In summary, the S. I. disbanded because it exhausted itself trying to organize itself into a non-hierarchical organization. Also, the S. I. disbanded because it was succumbing to the logic of its own socio-economic critique, becoming a media commodity and an object of contemplation, that continued to be marginalized in the mass media. Nevertheless, the S. I.'s marginalization and commodification, which was occurring because of its rising popularity, influenced debates on capitalism in the sense that its own marginalization and commodification acknowledged capitalism's profound recuperative capabilities.

Consequently, the conclusion will summarize the significance of the S. I. and its influences on popular culture and on subsequent movements such as the Anti-Globalization Movement, Terrorist Movements and the Green parties. This brief sketch is designed to display that each of these movements exhibits elements of the S. I. and some of its original militancy. However, due to the limited scope of this study, the conclusion will not delve too deeply on these movements and their relationships to the S. I., it will only outline some broad trends within the S. I. that continue to influence subsequent alternative/sub-cultural movements and oppositional/counter-cultural movements.

Conclusion

The Situationist International and its influences on Popular Culture and subsequent movements such as the Anti-Globalization Movement, Terrorist Movements and Green parties

First and foremost, the focus of this study was to closely examine the Situationist International's theoretical ideas and its cultural practices most clearly expressed in its journals, Guy Debord's book The Society of the Spectacle, and its actions before, during and after the events of May 68. The objective was to show the Situationist International is significant to the study of communication because its cultural practices, its political actions and its socio-economic critique of our image/information culture have transformed contemporary debates on art, power, capitalism, revolution and everyday life.

After having explored the theoretical roots, cultural practices and the political actions of the S. I. showing some of the S. I.'s contributions to contemporary debates, I will now examine the broad effect that the S. I. continues to exert. The S. I. has influenced popular culture and subsequent movements such as the Anti-Globalization Movement, Terrorist Movements and the Green parties.

Foremost, its idea of *détournement* has influenced popular culture through punk music. For instance, in the late 1970's a punk music group called the Sex Pistols used the method of *détournement* to subvert popular images. One image that the group subverted was that of Queen Elizabeth [image 24]. The image bears a close resemblance to an S. I. poster that was propagated during the May 68 uprisings [image 25]. Both images express a symbolic negation of the dominant hegemony. The Sex Pistol's subversive image ridicules the monarchy, England's

[image 24]

Sex Pistols flyer by Jamie Reid, 1977

[image 25]

[image 26]

1.3
Jamie Reid
Sex Pistols Mural, 1983
Installation photograph,
Musée national d'art moderne,
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989

Detail.
Jamie Reid for the Sex Pistols
Photo courtesy Assorted Images Ltd.

[image 27]

1.8

Jenny Holzer

Selections from TRUISMS, 1982

Spectacolor Board

Times Square, New York

Photo courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery,
New York

symbolic representation of authority. Likewise, the S. I.'s subversive image symbolically suggests that under the dominant hegemony youths do not have a voice. Although the Sex Pistols were primarily a cultural manifestation, expressing themselves in alternative/sub-cultural manners through music and *détournement* rather than in oppositional/counter-cultural modes, there is a definite Situationist influence in their practices, as I have shown.

Additionally, the S. I.'s ideas have also influenced contemporary art in the sense that certain artists have increasingly accepted the fact that art is an integral part of everyday life. For example in 1989, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston organized an art exhibit honoring both the S. I.'s cultural practices and the influences the movement continues to have on popular art through punk music [image 26] and artists such as Jenny Holzer. Her social commentary pieces reflect the S. I.'s slogans [image 27]. Elizabeth Sussman, the Deputy Director for Programs at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, also noted during the 1989 show that:

The formally controversial claim that art is integrally linked to, not separate from, the social and political is now increasingly accepted. . . [The S. I.] has shown. . . [that] the development of the technologies of mechanical reproduction, that is, the rise of the mass media, has had dramatic ramifications for cultural production across a broad spectrum of media and texts throughout the twentieth century. This was the context of the work of the Situationist International, a theoretical, political, and an avant-garde that articulated the status of the art work in what has been termed the age of capitalist alienation and technological mediation. . . By means of brash artistic practice and sustained theoretical innovations intended to subvert this condition, the Situationists proposed to transform what Guy Debord, in a prescient formulation, called the society of the spectacle.³⁹⁴

³⁹⁴ Elizabeth Sussman, On the Passage of a Few Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957-1972 (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1989) 2.

Although, Sussman's remarks are far from accurate, since she trivializes and marginalizes the S. I. in the sense that she assumes that their aims primarily revolved around aesthetics and the transformation of everyday life through aesthetics, her exhibition shows that elements of the S. I. have influenced current popular culture. However it is important to note that this influence is commodified, devoid of the S. I.'s original militancy and in all respects the antithesis of everything the S. I. came to stand for and revolted against during its years of operation. In addition, this exhibition is an excellent example of capitalism's profound recuperative capabilities in the sense that capitalism can recuperate subversive movements, theories and practices that are ultimately diametrically oppose to it.

Subsequent movements that the S. I. has influenced are the Anti-Globalization Movement, Terrorist Movements and the Green parties. Due to the limited scope of this study, I will not delve too deeply on these movements and their relationships to the S. I., but I will outline some broad trends within the S. I. that continue to influence these subsequent movements. First the Anti-Globalization Movement has, without realizing it, incorporated the S. I.'s critique. For example, entrenched in Naomi Klein's analysis of corporate brands in the book, No Logo, is Guy Debord's theory of the commodity-spectacle. According to Klein, a brand is "the core meaning of the modern corporation. . .[not] just scientific; [but]. . .spiritual. Brands [can] conjure a feeling [of]. . .something personal, warm and human"³⁹⁵. Similarly, Debord states that a brand is something spiritual which can insight religious zeal in the consumer. At its peak, a brand can

³⁹⁵ Naomi Klein, No Logo (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000) 6-7.

incite a consumer into:

an outpouring of religious zeal in honor of the commodity's sovereign freedom. . . Waves of enthusiasm for particular products fueled and boosted by the communication media, are propagated with lightning speed. . . This process bears eloquent witness to a mystical self-abandonment to the transcendent spirit of the commodity. Following in the footsteps of the old religious fetishism. . . the commodity achieves . . . [for consumers] moments of acute fervor.³⁹⁶

According to Klein, it is this "brand fetishism" that corporations attempt to achieve when they divest themselves of their labor force and pump their finances into advertising and marketing. As a result, she claims, "what companies produce primarily [are] not things, but images of their brands. . . its success has companies competing in a race towards weightlessness: whoever owns the least. . . and produces the most powerful images. . . wins the race"³⁹⁷. Debord articulated this race to colonize the metaphysical when he stated in 1967 that "the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail. . . proclaim the predominance of appearances and assert that all human life, which is to say all social life is [becoming] mere appearance"³⁹⁸. Despite the fact that Klein does not go as far in her analysis as Debord, we can nevertheless see that Klein's analysis of the brand is similar to Debord's earlier critique.

Another similarity between the S. I. and the Anti-Globalization Movement is the S. I.'s concept of the festive/spontaneous revolution and the Anti-Globalization Movement's use of

³⁹⁶ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 43-44.

³⁹⁷ Naomi Klein, No Logo (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000) 4.

³⁹⁸ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 12-14.

[image 28]

street parties. Streets parties work on a smaller scale than spontaneous/festive revolution. These parties are designed to reclaim single streets from the tyranny of the automobile and the economy, while the festive/spontaneous revolution is much broader in scale. The street party begins when a mass of people secretly gather at a certain destination. An elaborate means of blocking traffic is constructed, often consisting of a scaffolding tripod quickly placed in the middle of the street with a lone man suspended up top. The scaffolding prevents cars from passing and police from stopping the event because moving the scaffolding will send the man crashing to the ground. Hence, with traffic blocked, the once private street is reclaimed as a public space, where people can gather to have fun and to socialize [image 28]. Similarly, referring to the Paris commune of 1871 as “the biggest festival of the nineteenth century”³⁹⁹, the S. I. argued in the 1960’s that a spontaneous/festive revolution would be an expression of revolutionary passions and pleasures in people that could demolish any state-government. Consequently, their idea came to fruition during May 68 when, according to the Situationist International:

The occupation was . . . a rejection of alienated labor; it was a festival, a game. . . And it was a rejection of all authority, all specialization, all hierarchical dispossession; a rejection of state. . . parties and unions. . . [where] international solidarity spontaneously reappeared. . . [and] transformed desires into reality. . . the revolutionary capacity of the masses and. . . their aptitude for freedom.⁴⁰⁰

The events of May 68, like the street parties, turned formerly private specialized spaces into

³⁹⁹ Guy Debord, “Theses on the Paris Commune,” *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 314.

⁴⁰⁰ Guy Debord, “The Beginning of an Era,” *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 226-228.

Young strikers on the march.

Snark International/Klein

Snark International/J-F Dars

"Clenched fists for the revolution, comrades": Renault's home base at Boulogne-Billancourt.

public spaces were people could socialize and “be at home everywhere”⁴⁰¹ [image 29]. However, unlike the small localized street parties, the festive events of May 68 occurred on a national scale. Despite this difference, we can see that there are similarities between the S. I.’s spontaneous/festive revolution and the Anti-Globalization Movement’s street parties, which again demonstrates that the S. I.’s ideas continue to resurface within subsequent oppositional/counter-cultural movements.

Another oppositional/counter-cultural movement that the S. I. has influenced is the 1970’s Italian Marxist group, Autonomia. First and foremost, the primary theoretical link between the S. I. and Autonomia is the S. I.’s concept of the spectacle and Autonomia’s concept of the social factory. In order to outline the Autonomist perspective I will refer to Nick Dyer-Witheford’s, Cyber-Marx, which extensively examines this Italian movement. Chiefly, according to Dyer-Witheford, Autonomia theorized that “capital’s tendency to ‘subsume’ not only the workplace but also society as whole into its processes [had]. . . created a situation where the entire society now functions as a moment of production.”⁴⁰² The group referred to this new social condition as the social factory. Like Autonomia, Debord’s theory of the spectacle recognizes that society is now integrated into the production process. For example, Debord states:

Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. . . with the advent of the so-called second industrial revolution, alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1989) 430.

⁴⁰² Nick Dyer-Witheford, Cyber-Marx (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) 67.

⁴⁰³ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 13-29.

Although the S. I. argue that this integration is total and all-compassing, with everyday life totally colonized, Autonomia believes that as capital colonizes the world, it also unites its oppositions and puts into motion the forces that can do away with its domination. For example, according to Dyer-Witherford, Autonomia argued that “in plotting the nodes and the links necessary to capital’s flow it [i.e. capitalism] also charts the points where those continuities can be ruptured. . . as capital integrates. . . diverse rebellions”⁴⁰⁴. Of course, Debord and the S. I. always stated, like Autonomia, that “as capital spreads out . . . capitalism’s expansion brings forth a force that strives to do away with it”⁴⁰⁵. However, under their notion of the fully integrated spectacle, any opposition is impossible, since everything and everyone is fully integrated into the spectacle, (see Chapter 3, Part 2). Despite this fact, Autonomia’s social factory displays glaring similarities to Debord’s spectacle.

Another element of the S. I. that resurfaced in Autonomia is *détournement*. This practice re-emerges within Autonomia in the form of sabotage. According to Dyer-Witherford, Autonomia theorized that sabotage was a means of undermining and refusing capitalism development. For example, Dyer-Witherford states that Autonomia’s:

insistence on the perpetually contested nature of the labor-capital relation and the basic independence of human creativity tends. . . towards a focus on possibilities for counter-appropriation, re-functioning, and *détournement*. If machinery is a weapon [use against workers] then it can . . . be stolen or captured. . . If capital “interweaves”

⁴⁰⁴ Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) 92.

⁴⁰⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 34.

technology and power, then this weaving can be undone.⁴⁰⁶

As a result, through the use of sabotage, the Autonomist movement attempted to reassert labor and the worker by re-appropriating, destroying or subverting capitalism's objects and its machinery and using them against the very the system that created them. Consequently, Autonomia's use of sabotage like the S. I.'s use of *détournement* is an "insurrectional style. . . [that is] subversive. . . [and] capable of disturbing or overthrowing any existing order"⁴⁰⁷. Moreover, similar to the destruction and the barricades of May 68, which were radical manifestations of *détournement*, sabotage is a practical means of undermining the existing order. Hence, in this respect, in its use of sabotage, Autonomia displays some of the S. I.'s original militancy, and it displays itself as an oppositional/counter-cultural movement.

Some of the S. I.'s ideas and practices have also resurfaced within Germany's Green parties, most notably in their notion of grass-roots democracy or direct open democracy and their ideas concerning social responsibility, which demands that we view and approach the world in a holistic way. However, before I begin it is important to note that unlike the S. I. who as a movement was always marginalized and continually forced to exist on fringes of society, the ecological movement successfully transformed itself from an oppositional/counter-cultural movement into a viable party. The primary reason for this was that the Greens, unlike the S. I., strictly based themselves on nonviolent practices such as sit-ins and other methods of minor civil

⁴⁰⁶ Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) 71.

⁴⁰⁷ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 144-146.

disobedience. As a result, unlike the S. I., the Green parties are alternative/sub-cultural movements that attempt to reorient traditional parties towards more environment friendly policies. Since 1983, when they won 5.6 percent of the vote in Germany's federal election⁴⁰⁸, the Greens have co-existed within the dominant hegemony as the fourth party in Germany's federal parliament. Chiefly, according to Sabine Von Dirke's book, All Power to the Imagination, the Greens have been able to sustain themselves and to influence the dominant hegemony because the movement is committed to "ecology, social responsibility, grass-roots democracy and nonviolence"⁴⁰⁹. It is these four principles that buttress Green politics. Additionally, while ecological preservation has been around for over a century, it was the Greens who popularized these ideas within the contemporary hegemony. For example, Von Dirke states:

The principle of ecology meant that the Greens not only articulated environmental concerns but also called for a transformation of the hegemonic paradigm of permanent progress and unrestrained economic growth in favor of conservation in order to avoid irreversible ecological losses and environmental catastrophes.⁴¹⁰

This concept of conservation also extends into areas where civil liberties and peace are in jeopardy. Although the S. I. understood the importance of the environment, it primarily relegated itself to a socio-economic critique of capitalism since it understood capitalism as the cause of environmental destruction. For example in 1972, Debord stated that:

Pollution and the proletariat are today the two concrete aspects of the critique of political

⁴⁰⁸ Sabine Von Dirke, All Power to the Imagination (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 183.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 184.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid*, 184.

economy. . .[since] at the moment when everything has entered the sphere of economic goods, even spring-water and the air of towns, everything has become economic sickness. . .dangers that become more oppressive as the months go by. . .[as a result] the relation between production and the productive forces have finally reached a point of radical incompatibility, because the existing social system has bound its fate to the pursuit of . . .unbearable deterioration of all the conditions of life.⁴¹¹

Debord and the S. I. are similar to the Greens in recognizing that ecological deterioration primarily results from economic factors. However, unlike the Greens who are content to work within the dominant hegemony, the S. I. firmly believe that only through total revolution can the ecological crisis be rectified. When the S. I. eventually disbanded, ecological preservation resurfaced with the Greens and became the cornerstone of their mandate in the mid-1970's.

Another link between the S. I. and the Greens is their concept of social responsibility which encompasses a holistic approach to understanding the world. Events, the economy, and political issues such as ecological destruction, are deemed to be interrelated. Similar to Debord and the S. I., the Greens believe that capitalist society "can only be understood in its undistorted essence. . . as a whole"⁴¹². Consequently under their notion of social responsibility, the Greens call for the fair distribution of national and international wealth among people and nations, since the group views ecological exploitation as intertwined with economic issues such as economic disparities between nations. However, according to Von Dirke, the concept of social responsibility goes:

⁴¹¹ Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, "Theses on the Situationist International and its Time," The Veritable Split in the International (www.situationist.cjb.net, 1972) 6.

⁴¹² Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 25.

further than welfare programs and new modes of aid to developing countries. It encompassed a vague notion of a better, non-alienated life, in which the human being will be restored to his or her full creative powers. Green politics [strives] for a society in which the subject is not reduced to a passive recipient of either food stamps and unemployment checks or of the commodities that the market economy provides. . .the Greens advocate a model of a society in which everybody has a chance for self-actualization and political, social, and cultural participation.⁴¹³

These aspirations by the Greens echo the S. I.'s ideas concerning the realization of a revolution of everyday life. Similar to the Greens' concept of social responsibility, the S. I.'s "revolution of everyday life. . .[will] foster the development of fully realized human beings. . . [with the] satisfaction of . . .real desires. . .[and the] reconstruction of all. . .patterns of behavior imposed by alienated reality"⁴¹⁴. However, unlike the Greens, the S. I. envisioned that only through a total revolution can human beings become fully developed and satisfied. Despite this crucial difference, the Greens' concept of social responsibility does share a resemblance with the S. I.'s concept of the revolution of everyday life.

Another element of the S. I. that resurfaced in the Green parties is the idea of participatory politics which coincides with the Greens' belief in grass-roots democracy. Although this idea has been around for a long-time, both the Greens and S. I. aspired to realize this alternative form of organization. Despite the fact that the S. I. ultimately failed in its attempts to organize itself and the world in a non-hierarchical form (see Chapter 5), the Greens have been moderately successful. To a certain extent the Greens have been more successful in sustaining this organizational form

⁴¹³Sabine Von Dirke, All Power to the Imagination (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 185.

⁴¹⁴Situationist International and Students of Strasbourg, On the Poverty of Student Life (Strasbourg: www.situationist.cjb.net, 1966) 10-12.

because the Greens do not position themselves as an oppositional/counter-cultural movement, which consequently allows the Greens and their ideas to co-exist within the dominant hegemony. For instance, according to the German Greens, the internal organization of their movement and their relationship to their supporters and voters is the exact the opposite to the established parties in Bonn. As a result, the Greens state that:

Because of this, we have decided to form a new type of party organization, the basic structures of which are set up in a grass-roots-democratic and decentralized way; the two things cannot in fact be separated. . . [since] political decisions should always be taken on the lowest possible levels, thus facilitating a maximum of direct involvement of those who will be affected by the decisions.⁴¹⁵

This aspect of the Greens closely resembles the S. I.'s idea of workers' council organization where people can "emerge from. . . a purely contemplative role. . . in [politics]"⁴¹⁶ and fully participate in their self-management, "workers' councils. . . encourage. . . creativity, . . . non-hierarchies, coordination, rotation of tasks. . . [and] universal freedom"⁴¹⁷. Hence, in this respect, the S. I.'s decentralized form of organization parallels the Greens idea of grass-roots democracy. Like the S. I. the Greens understand this form of organization as a "model for society as a whole"⁴¹⁸. Consequently, although the Greens were not militant like the S. I., they did utilize similar ideas as the S. I., and to a certain extent their ideas attained more political legitimacy and

⁴¹⁵ Sabine Von Dirke, All Power to the Imagination (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 185-186.

⁴¹⁶ Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 87.

⁴¹⁷ Raoul Vaneigem, "Notice to the Civilized Concerning Generalized Self-Management," Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 286-289.

⁴¹⁸ Sabine Von Dirke, All Power to the Imagination (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 186.

mass appeal because they did not attempt to subvert the dominant hegemony. However, the fact that the Greens have become integrated into the dominant hegemony only means that the dominant capitalist hegemony continues.

In conclusion, movements such as the S. I. will continue to inspire and their ideas will continue to resurface through subsequent movements because ultimately the dominant hegemony persists in disillusioning, oppressing, marginalizing, trivializing and exploiting portions of the population. Although alternative/sub-cultural movements such as the Greens do achieve moderate successes inside the dominant hegemony, they refuse to articulate the real cause of exploitation and continual deprivation. Hence, for this reason, oppositional/counter-cultural movements like the S. I. will continue to re-emerge and attract supporters because these movements are not afraid to publicly acknowledge that capitalism is despotic and the root of all exploitation; and that the only resolution to capitalism's tyranny is the forceful appropriation of the means of production. However, most importantly, these oppositional/counter-cultural movements continue to re-emerge and attract supporters because they hold *autonomy* as the highest human value that must be defended at all costs. It is this uncompromising position against the dominant hegemony that incites both admiration among supporters and apprehension among detractors because, as Karl Von Clausewitz states:

a people [that] . . . values [nothing] higher than the dignity and freedom of its existence. . . [will] defend these with the last drop of its blood; . . . a people [or movement] is unconquerable if it fights a spirited struggle for its liberty; . . . a bloody and honorable fight assures the rebirth of [a] people [or movement]. . . such a struggle is the seed of life from which a new tree inevitably blossoms. . . [as well] only in this manner can. . . [people] arise

from the sick bed. . . [of] foreign [hegemonic] chains.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁹ Karl Von Clausewitz, War, Politics and Power, ed. Edward M. Collins (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1970) 301-302.

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