

AT DUSK

**THE SITUATIONIST MOVEMENT
IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**



**Perspectives
1975**

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Published August 1975

Price: \$1.00

"It is surely not difficult to see that our time is a time of birth and transition to a new period. The spirit has broken with what was hitherto the world of its existence and imagination and is about to submerge all this in the past; it is at work giving itself a new form."

— *The Phenomenology of Spirit.*

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All periods of historical transition are characterized by a fundamental ambiguity: within a changing reality, both growth and decay appear to be frozen in social time, and what is ascending cannot easily be distinguished from that which is entering a state of final decline. In this respect, the current era of world history presents itself as a prolonged *entr'acte* in an unresolved drama, as an extended interval in which the poorly defined characters of "past" and "future" occupy the same stage—that of the officially recognized "present." Under such uncertain conditions, the climax of one historical epoch conceals the beginnings of another; events which seem most tentative are in fact the most momentous. The imbalance of prevailing political, economic, and cultural formations has resulted in a kind of social vertigo in which reality is in flux, and in which, therefore, everything is possible. But if it is clear that what has previously been considered as the status quo no longer maintains, it is far from obvious that existing social authority, in advanced countries at least, faces any immediate prospect of its revolutionary abolition.

The radical ambivalence of contemporary appearances is nowhere more clearly shown than in the confused "public" recognition of global change, a recognition made public in different ways by the various directorates of the present world order, and in the equally confused counter-interpretations of this change by those who, for numerous and often quite dissimilar reasons, seek to replace existing systems with new forms of society. The proverbial "riddle of history" — and its supposed "solution" as discovered by Marx—remain relevant precisely as enigmas, both to the titular masters of recent history and to those who have been dispossessed by this alienated history. The sphinx of modern development can be answered, however, and this response must be formulated in the only language which it understands: dialectics. The task of theoretical criticism remains that of specifying the axial principles and the faultlines within existing modes of social organization, of elaborating a theory of social movement. To this extent, its sense of history is nothing more—and nothing less—than a sense of the

moving order of the present. The critique which wants to go beyond its immediate objects must know how to proceed: its prerequisite is self-consciousness—an understanding of what theory itself expresses. Moreover, the weapons of qualitative criticism can only be fully deployed within a decisive historical juncture: their natural element is crisis.

The signs of the times are first displayed by those who control the existing means of signification. It is thus not surprising that a superficial, though no less important, indication of the developing crisis of advanced capitalist society can be seen in the self-despair, the sense of the malevolent inexorability of current events, which has suddenly overcome bourgeois ideology. The viability of "modern civilization" has been impugned by its very apologists: *weltschmerz* is the social disease which today afflicts all the literati, especially the authorized "critics," in the dominant intellectual establishment. But this critical void is not the exclusive property of the modern academy; the latter's sterile apocalyptic vision finds an appropriate counterpart in the insipid rhetoric of modern leftism, which can only resurrect a vulgar-Marxist eschatology concerning the "final collapse of capitalism" in order to explain recent developments. The theoretical and practical inertia of the organized left would not itself be of interest were it not that this condition equally describes the situation of any real oppositional movement within present society. It is a supreme historical irony that the intensification of contradictions within developed capitalist states has been contemporaneous with a general paralysis of modern revolutionary currents. Despite the extreme likelihood of mass discontent in the face of the abrupt deceleration of economic growth in superindustrial countries (expressing itself in protests over unemployment and the decline in the real income of workers, which had been eroded by the inflationary period preceding the recession), it is evident that one movement to suppress existing conditions—that which arose in advanced capitalism during the 1960's—has faltered. What formerly announced itself as the specter of a complete overturning of extant social relationships has merely become a latent contingency within a field of evolutionary possibilities. If this extremism survives, it will not be of its own doing but rather as a fortuitous consequence of advanced capitalism's economic crisis. Radicalism will again assume significant proportions because the times are once again radical, but what, if any, revolutionary movements emerge in the near future will represent the start of something new and not a simple continuation of past tendencies.

As one phase of social development comes to an apparent close, the center of structural gravity in the world of political economy has shifted, leaving many material and ideological assumptions in its wake. But already the shapes of things to come can be partially discerned in the encoded language of modern productive culture. Advanced capitalism has been forced to reassess its expectations, and the ideology of unlimited abundance which served as a compelling incentive during its most recent

expansionary cycle has been summarily dispensed with. The promise of a terrestrial paradise of the commodity now dissipates before the drab reality of economic stagnation. On the command of capital, a more subdued scenario is devised: all available resources are directed towards the stabilization, through remedial actions, of the economic status quo. Thus, the immediate exigencies of advanced capitalism now correspond to those of a developmental plateau rather than of an "economic miracle"; the system must presently occupy itself with protecting its past conquests. All the partners in this business concern are forced to assert themselves in order to preserve their miserable shares in the common enterprise, and this assertion is made at the expense of the social peace previously concluded between all parties. But whatever the momentary conflicts of interest which divide these collaborators, they are united on basic principles. Despite obligatory denunciations of the high cost of their constituents' survival, union bureaucracies have been active accomplices in the implementation of austerity programs within the "First World" of the commodity. The primary objective of these programs has been ideological austerity, a limiting of possible responses to the economic crisis to alternatives within existing society; the ultimate success of capitalism's corrective measures depends on dissimulation, on a necessary distortion in which the aberrancies of the system are made the collective responsibility of all those who are subject to their consequences. Such an accountability has been stressed in different ways, according to changes in the economic climate: in the face of accelerating inflation, the former inhabitants of the "affluent society" were admonished to practice self-restraint in the name of "conservation"; now, in the wake of an economic contraction brought about by the collapse of consumer demand from the effects of inflation, they are expected to bear the brunt of a "national sacrifice" so that commerce may once again flourish. Throughout all these vicissitudes of the capitalist market, what is being conserved is precisely a social ecology of alienated practice.

The domination of objectified labor over living labor, and consequently over all of life, acquires its full significance in capitalist society within a context of economic disequilibrium. The capricious behavior of even the most programmed Western economies does not simply result in commercial fluctuations, but necessarily involves the disruption of social activity. Reified social organization formally expresses an inversion of material and human categories: here, the circulation of things becomes the determining axis of social movement. This fundamental irrationality assumes a rational appearance within an environment governed by the laws of capitalist accumulation. Such authority exercises a direct monopoly over social meaning: by prior definition, economic dislocation becomes natural disaster, an immutable fate before which human society must submit. But while the current crisis is indicative of the distorting power of bourgeois ideology, it also reveals a serious debility in modern economic structures. Although its exact social consequences remain as yet problematical, the

deepening recession of developed economies suggests that capitalism has now encountered a qualitative barrier to its further quantitative expansion. This obstacle is shown not only in a failure to calibrate productive and consumptive mechanisms but in a pervasive uncertainty concerning the immediate future of the entire modern economic order. However much the present arrestment of capitalist growth appears to unfold on a material level as a crisis of "overproduction," it can only be fully understood in terms of social crisis.

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The exact dimensions of the present juncture in world history only become apparent when they are viewed in relation to an entire cycle of previous social development. Seen from this perspective, the confused pattern of contemporary events finds a hidden order. The symptoms of crisis which today proliferate everywhere signal the end of the post-war era: they represent the conclusion of advanced capitalism's uninterrupted economic growth and quite possibly the larger cultural transformations initiated by this expansion. As this period finishes, it is possible—and necessary—to assess its history, to describe its essential characteristics. To do so, criticism must establish the fundamental contours of advanced capitalist development. It must therefore really distinguish advanced capitalism from other forms of capitalism, elaborating a theory of modern social processes, their history and their contradictions. The history of advanced capitalism necessarily encounters the history of opposition to this society; one phenomenon implies the other, and not simply on one level. The connection between advanced capitalism and its opposition cannot be grasped simply as an antagonistic relationship, i.e., as a relation of opposites. To suggest a convergence between capitalist development and its opposition is not merely to state that the dynamics of opposition were determined by those of capitalism, but to postulate a real identity between them. Without resorting to over-simplification, it can be said that the "modern revolutionary movement" was to a quite precise extent a reflection of modern capitalist society. Thus, in order to specify the theme of opposition to advanced capitalist society, it is necessary to specify the constituent features of this social form. For the purposes of the present article, such a specification can only be made on a rudimentary level.

As previously noted, the immediate historical context of advanced capitalism is that of the post-war era, when a reconstruction period of the developed capitalist economies rapidly became transformed into an era of sustained and accelerated growth. During this period—which may still be considered as contemporary even though its ascendant phase is already part of the immediate past—capitalism, as a cultural as well as economic system, sought to sever any connection with its "primitive" origins and, in so doing, to overcome the negative (i.e., dysfunctional)

consequences of its previous development. The rise of advanced capitalism is that of a progressive capitalism and coincides with the full realization of a liberal-pluralist model of social organization. Within this environment, capitalist power—which no longer appeared as such, i.e., as *capitalist* power, having achieved an “objective” or neutral aspect and hence a certain invisibility—emerged as *fundamentally reformist*. Although it was far from a uniform or continuous phenomenon, this reformist dynamic of advanced capitalism exhibited itself in various dimensions: on an institutional level (in the reform of basic social institutions, from the labor process to the nuclear family); in the sphere of authority relationships (in the progressive realignment of social relations, from sex roles to the distribution of power in the “political” process); and on a normative level (in the diversification of general social “values”).

This series of transformations did not simply “occur,” either by conscious design or through historical inevitability. It represented neither the triumph of a progressive faction of bourgeois ideology, nor a simple extrapolation of previous trends in capitalist development. The genesis of the advanced capitalist state can be interpreted in terms of a specific constellation of social and material forces: the extensive—and expansive—modification of capitalist culture in the current era has its origins in a material base, the advanced capitalist economy, and in the constraints imposed upon capitalist social organization by a hitherto irreducible class conflict. During the period under discussion, capitalism, in its own way, once again demonstrated the intimate connection between material and social progress. “Affluence,” or a level of relative economic abundance, was not a superficial feature of advanced capitalist culture but rather its essence, its organizing principle. But the specific attributes of advanced capitalism cannot be elucidated only out of an accumulation of material wealth. On the contrary, the social configuration (a term embracing both “form” and “content”) assumed by advanced capitalism must be seen as an adaptation to certain historical circumstances, as an organized response to the challenge of past movements against capitalist authority. The modern welfare state stands as the most enduring legacy of the European and American workers’ movements in the first half of this century, representing a society profoundly transformed by class struggle. Capitalism’s incorporation of the reformist impetus (“reformist” here understood not necessarily in a pejorative sense), and indeed much of the social program, of its former opposition represents perhaps the most significant achievement of advanced capitalism, defining the context of new social antagonisms and circumscribing the history of the social movements which these contradictions generated.

In order to develop at all, the capitalist system must constantly revolutionize its own material and social bases, and the permanent revolution conducted by capitalism does not only consist in the imposition of its mode of societal organization throughout the world, but in an ongoing renewal of its internal structures. Despite

its present (and highly significant) inertia, the evolution of advanced capitalism has been predicated on a principle of perpetual motion, a principle which has obtained in both the modern economy and the general culture within which this economy is literally the driving power. The dynamic equilibrium which represents the ideal state of capitalist production extends to bourgeois society as a whole, which is unceasing in its accumulation and application of social technique, in its redesigning of modes of human practice. On a macrocosmic level, the intensive rate of structural change within contemporary society can be resolved into mutually related processes of dissolution and consolidation, encompassing a simultaneous overthrow of antiquated economic forms, social hierarchies, and legitimizing beliefs, and their replacement by new, more "modern" ones. Advanced capitalism organized itself around a comprehensive—and for a time it appeared unlimited—task of social modernization, that is, a modification and *amelioration* of the conditions of social life under capitalism. Modernity represented both the image and substance of this project and must be understood in both senses: as the unifying goal of existing social practice, a collective *telos* anchored in the historical given, and as the sustaining momentum of advanced capitalist reproduction. In the culture of advanced capitalism, the secular religion of modernism found its social expression in the official glorification of contemporary values (as opposed to those associated with "tradition"), an exaltation seen most overtly in the much-discussed "cult of youth." This expression went beyond the establishment of a new value system, however: it allowed capitalism to identify itself wholly with modernism as such and even enabled it to appear as "value-free," as simply the most advanced, and thus the most rational, example of social organization. This connection was made concretely in a rationalized form of capitalist domination, in the implementation of a calculus of power seemingly indifferent to the ends towards which it was applied. The bare beginnings of this bureaucratization of authority relations in the capitalist state and economy were observed in detail, albeit imperfectly, by Weber. If the primary purpose of this standardization of capitalist power was to improve the functioning performance of economic and political mechanisms, it nevertheless served as a means to further expand capital's influence over society; the advance of the modern capitalist bureaucracy was accompanied by a general reticulation of social structures, a "spreading out" of capitalist institutions. There were limits, of course, to the consolidation of a uniform capitalist authority, and advanced capitalism retained many of the qualities of a clientelistic state, with distinct interest groups competing for shares of power within a commonly defined arena of contention. And for all of its "progressive" features, the modern capitalist state proved itself on occasion to be crudely repressive in the defense of its authority. Nonetheless, advanced capitalism did succeed in accomplishing a general reduction of tensions in a society which,

of course, still remained divided along class lines. Indeed, the institutionalization, on an official level, of the struggle between capital and labor meant that the management of social conflict had become an essential part of the legitimation process in modern capitalist society. (1)

Advanced capitalism, however, should be analyzed not solely in the static terms of its formal power arrangements, but in the fluid terms of its overall movement and the general cultural themes underlying this motion. Of these themes, perhaps the most important has been the relative democratization of capitalist society, a liberalization which must be related directly to economic prosperity (hence the specificity of this "opening," its real limits and its reversible character). While quite necessarily retaining its own abolition of class distinctions, advanced capitalism attempted its own abolition of class society, seeking to remove the most obvious, i.e., the most visible, cultural denotations of class. The egalitarian thrust of advanced capitalist culture materialized as a far from superficial "levelling effect" throughout society. This resulted both in a more democratic image of social man and woman (advertising *being the medium most responsive to new values*) and, more fundamentally, in an altered class structure. The limited equalization of class power in advanced capitalism took place at both ends of the existing social hierarchy: it occurred as a result of the displacement of the traditional ruling class—which became transformed in the general broadening of the power base of capitalist domination—and as a consequence of the increased upward mobility of the traditional working class. New class positions emerged from this, as the power of the classic commercial bourgeoisie was incorporated within that of a new, though no less capitalist, elite and as the objective differences between the industrial working class and other sectors of the capitalist work force narrowed. Concurrent with the realization of such a new, more simplified balance of class forces, however, was a further internal differentiation within classes, resulting, for example, in a high degree of stratification within the "professional" class, and on a broader level, in a proliferation of sub-groupings within the interstices of advanced capitalist culture. This submergence of class identity must be linked to a seemingly contradictory phenomenon in advanced capitalism: the reduced role of the labor process as a source of social identification (work categories no longer being the exclusive determinants of cultural "types" and the importance of work time itself diminishing in relation to that of other activities) and the increased role of the collective product of economic activity as a source of legitimation. Prosperity appeared as the real legitimation process in advanced capitalism, allowing for an individualized "overcoming" of class barriers and "satisfaction" of hitherto repressed needs.

Of course, the "freedom" of advanced capitalism had its other side, and not simply, as the left would have it, that of the exploitation of minorities and the Third World. The privileges of the consumer society were obviously accompanied and sustained by

the intensification of the total level of (proletarian) consumption and its correlate, the total level of productivity, but these facts represented only an aspect of the overall intensification of social activity in advanced capitalism. As much as any developing society, advanced capitalism can be considered as a society in mobilization: here, as elsewhere, accelerated economic development translated into a rapid acceleration of social life and thus, its measurement, social time. Furthermore, the exaggerated cadences of contemporary existence, rhythms directly related to the "pace of things" in the advanced capitalist economy, were themselves only the motor forces of a larger process—the reproduction of advanced capitalism in general and as a *whole* with an independent status, i.e., with an existence independent of its producers. This alienation of social powers from social forces (namely, the proletariat) forms an essential starting point for radical criticism of advanced capitalism, but the "concentrated alienation" of social labor—and social being—in contemporary society has many facets, all of which cannot be reduced to the social and psychological theme of alteriority, understood as "otherness" or "estrangement." The (self-)transformation of capitalism into advanced capitalism can be measured by various criteria, but perhaps the most important of these has been the extension, both formally and informally, of capitalist domination over the entire range of public expression, and thus "private" life, in modern society. One of the characteristics of advanced capitalist development has been that, even as the percentage of the work force directly engaged in the production of commodities has diminished in relation to other sectors, commodity relations have come to dominate all of social life. This "commodification" of society can be understood as the progressive absorption by the advanced capitalist economy of other, previously "distinct" social spheres (notably those of culture and the family) and the consequent emergence of a highly-integrated social economy. In its advanced stage, therefore, modern capitalism established a ubiquitous power, maintaining this effective presence only by becoming the effective, i.e., the only generally conceivable, realization of collective needs and wants. It imposed its absolute authority over the objective and subjective possibilities of human activity and imposed this order as the public expression of such possibilities, as the image of social practice before society. Within this hermetic enclosure, capitalism's authoritarian use of the existing means of social communication—means which it, after all, created—results in a pervasive conditioning of thought and activity, in the forcible, if subliminal, structuring of individual and collective psychologies. Advanced capitalism, through this structuration of experience, creates a framework of significance and thus one of signification: it assigns meaning to social activity (establishing the real worth of work, consumption, and participation in society) and determines the way in which this activity is itself interpreted by those who engage in it.

The authoritarian nature of the advanced capitalist state must be understood in a further, objective dimension, however; the

metamorphosis of capitalism into advanced capitalism must be explained as such, as a change in the form of social organization. Such a transformation occurs in the form of *articulation* of social capital: in advanced capitalism, the total social product (including the social relations which presuppose this product) becomes animated, assuming a real "life" for itself above and beyond simply furnishing the basis for new accumulation of capital. This symbolization of capital (the suffusion of capital throughout social appearances) implies that, in advanced capitalism, social objectification goes beyond objects themselves, and even beyond the objectification of society in its entirety, to the objectification of a collective "spirit" or ethos, a unifying social consciousness which assumes a symbolic, representational form independent of particular social institutions. Advanced capitalism is distinguished by the complexity of its socialization process and by the importance which the fabrication of social identity plays in this process. Here, the individual is identified—and has society identified for him or her—on both a figurative (e.g., the visual transmission of social norms, a socialization through images) and concrete (the actual reinforcement, both "positive" and "negative," of acceptable social behavior) level. What must be recognized, however, is the expanded context of socialization in advanced capitalism and the corresponding increase in the "public sphere" of society. It is even possible to speak here of a "forced collectivization" of experience: advanced capitalist development tends toward the suppression of any distinction between "public" and "private" selves, between egoistic and social behavior, and ensures the supremacy of public identity. Even though "personal" freedom increases markedly, and it is the pursuit of "private" interests which appears to motivate social behavior, the "private" life of the individual is, in contrast to the mythology of traditional capitalism, no longer sacrosanct in advanced capitalism. On the contrary, it is raw material which can be shaped—and sold. Through this form of behavioral modification, every "personal" role becomes a social role. Durkheim, perhaps the bourgeois sociologist *par excellence*, proposed the idea of "organic solidarity" in order to explain, and justify, the cohesion of developed societies, and this form of social integration is indeed realized in advanced capitalism, but on a higher level than Durkheim imagined. It is not the primacy of codified mores, but of normative patterns implicit in contemporary culture, which determines the "solidarity" of advanced capitalist society. The community of interests nurtured—and inculcated—by advanced capitalism is not dependent on a single, all-embracing "set of beliefs"; its *Gesellschaft* is not recognized as such, appearing as simply the boundaries within which an increasingly diverse social life unfolds.

To insist upon the sophistication of capitalist power in its advanced state, however, is not to imply that this power developed without opposition or internal contradictions. On the contrary, it is necessary to discern the contradictory nature of advanced capitalist

development: the same means by which advanced capitalism secured itself and obtained its collective confirmation also tended to disrupt its underlying social fabric. By virtue of its multiformity, contemporary culture proved to be elastic, i.e., capable of absorbing new tendencies, however "unconventional" they may have appeared to be initially. This elasticity, however, at the same time created a certain "free space," if only at the margins of society, allowing for the formation of a critical and practical opposition to existing authority. Advanced capitalism also generated social antagonisms as a consequence of the objective requirements of its economic progress. For example, the mobilization of human capacities at the service of advanced capitalist development necessitated an intensive social division of labor, and this increased specialization of economic tasks (corresponding to a new complexity of the capitalist economy) was double-edged: it created an intellectual sector of the capitalist work force as it modernized traditional categories, and this process, while furthering a division of the proletariat against itself, supplied it with new weapons, of which the most important was thought itself. The limited intelligence required by the modern economy was like any other productive tool in that it could be turned against its prescribed use and thus become something else. However, the contradictions of advanced capitalism cannot be explained by reference to certain selective phenomena. General axes of social conflict must be established, and these lines of contradiction can be specified in three, highly simplified areas of crisis in advanced capitalist society: the crisis of authority resulting from an uneven distribution of social power; the crisis within the sphere of extended culture resulting from a widespread conflict between "old" and "new" values; and the purely economic crisis, at first relatively latent and then quite acute, resulting from the continued unstable nature of capitalist development. It is not coincidental that these areas of conflict correspond exactly to the areas of capitalist reform in this period. The crisis of advanced capitalism marked the limits of its reformist project and represented the excessive—from the point of view of capitalism—continuation of this reform. Social reform and social conflict were thus directly, and reciprocally, related in the history of advanced capitalism.

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The uncalculated results of the superindustrial revolution with which advanced capitalist society was inaugurated became apparent both on a material level, in the deleterious effects of capitalism's domination of nature, and on a social one, as a crisis resulting from the nature of capitalist domination. Of these systemic weaknesses, the more severe threat to expansionary capitalism was the active disruption of its social dictatorship by forces set in motion by the very process of capitalist modernization. It is not difficult to perceive that the radicalization of certain areas within developed society during the post-war era was itself a

consequence of the reformist project of advanced capitalism: oppositional movements emerged among those social groups most directly affected by structural change in the system. In the United States, this opposition developed within both modern and displaced sectors, at the margins and the center of advanced capitalist society, and manifested itself identically as: a movement arising to correct the imbalances of American society, as blacks and other minorities who had been excluded from the era of "peaceful prosperity" protested this exclusion and, on occasion, exacted their retribution through collective violence; and a movement in which the social forces specifically engendered by advanced capitalism challenged the new social order, all of whose "benefits" they enjoyed. These two movements were not unconnected, and the revolt of the urban colonies of the American welfare state was joined by, and contributed to, an "alienation of affections" from modern capitalism on the part of large numbers of its affluent youth, intelligentsia, and professional class; both movements, moreover, even while not being direct contributing factors, subsequently overlapped in the increased militancy of certain sectors of the American working class. But the real differences between these currents of opposition should not be minimized, and such distinct movements cannot simply be united to form a single modern "proletarian" movement. The revolts of minorities, the student movement, alternative culture, and radicalized working class (the latter being less a movement than the intimation of one) did not only differ in terms of their respective social origins, but in terms of the issues and forces they addressed. In a real sense, the only unity between these movements was a negative one, expressed in the fact that they each, to varying degrees, took advanced capitalist ideology at its most reformist word and thereby became only an extremist variant of the general reformation of modern social structures and values. Considered only negatively, and, that is to say, only one-sidedly: the black movement (except for its separatist wing), demanded the complete integration of existing society; the student movement organized itself around the democratization and sanitization of capitalism; the counter-culture appeared as an *ad hominem* projection of the hedonistic values of dominant culture; and the new working class movement—to the extent that it is even possible to speak of such—fought for a humane, as opposed to "inhumane" capitalist labor process and the democratic representation of working class interests.

The dimensions of the radicalization process in American society cannot be disputed, however, nor can the truly radical character of this process. Whatever its ultimate propensity towards reformism (a tendency reinforced by the violent opposition of authority to anything but reformism), the revolution of rising expectations in the advanced capitalist world was not entirely contained within the system's priorities. It was precisely the affirmative goals and rewards promoted by modern social propaganda which were rejected by this revolution, whose history

was one of a prolonged, almost subterranean insurrection against existing values and hierarchies. A profound transformation of consciousness occurred throughout many levels of society as the open expression of individual and collective dissatisfaction exposed, not simply the overt inequalities, but the actual human rapports by which that society functioned. In being diffused, radical discontent was situated on a new level, that of subjective experience. For most opponents to the system, the attempt to redefine social life was inseparably an attempt to redefine "personal" life, and the various challenges to occupational, sexual, and cultural roles in contemporary society put into question individual behavior as well as social relations. An essential motivation of social upheaval in advanced capitalism was the desire of individuals to live differently. But here again, what made this movement radical also facilitated its reabsorption within mainstream society; advanced capitalism proved itself to be perfectly capable of using the theme of personal liberation for its own marketable ends. Non-conformist culture became an acceptable alternative within, rather than outside, dominant culture, serving, in fact, as an experimental laboratory for the "leisure society" by opening up new areas of self-expression (new forms of popular psychology and media, to name only two) for capitalist penetration and by providing new values for cultural reform. Once neutralized and appropriated by conventional society, the alternative culture's search for "meaningful" activity—for work which would have some "influence"—became only a more contemporary, if more altruistic, version of the traditional capitalist cult of prestige. It is not simply ironic that many former "dropouts" from the commercial world later made their peace with capitalist institutions and joined them.

In retrospect, the radical movements which arose within advanced capitalist society appear principally as attacks on the predominant means of socialization (educational system, normative patterns) and integrative mechanisms (institutions which determined the composition of the work force and the ability of various groups to participate in decision-making processes) and this orientation indicates the strengths and weaknesses of these movements. The minoritarian, student, and feminist revolts challenged advanced capitalist institutions directly, if only to "open" them up, but at the same time, they provided a new basis for capitalist socialization in the very reform of the socialization process. The liberalization of capitalist integration only served the further legitimation of existing institutions. Such a result was inevitable, given the inability of these movements to extend themselves to a direct challenge of the mode of production in advanced capitalism. However, this assessment should not be construed as a deterministic evaluation or unqualified dismissal of modern oppositional tendencies; on the contrary, these tendencies, to the extent that they really opposed capitalism, must be seen as representing a new stage of class struggle which, while defeated paradoxically in both its isolation and generalization, remains to be recognized for its widening of the arena of conflict in

modern society. The possibilities of this social protest, as in the case of the feminist movement, are far from being exhausted.

Having considered modern radicalism, at least in its American variations, as a social movement with origins in the general contradictions of advanced capitalist development, it still must be described as an historical movement determined by immediate causal factors. If opposition to advanced capitalism emerged as a relatively widespread phenomenon, it obviously did not suddenly develop as a general response to the conditions of modern social life, but was initially a response to quite specific issues; much of *the transitory character of radical currents derived from their dependency upon certain events*. As a concentrated expression of capitalist violence, the American experiment in technological counterinsurgency in Vietnam assumed mythic proportions in its global implications. The immense spectacle of applied destruction in Indochina served as a catalyst for oppositional tendencies in countries that were not even marginally involved in the conflict. Quite aside from presenting the international left with a propitious opportunity to exhibit its selective "conscience," the Vietnam War initiated a chain reaction in the distended framework of Western society. By inadvertently demystifying the nature of its power, the *most imposing faction of international capitalism exposed the rationale underlying its hegemony*. The quantitative logic of refined terrorism, which governed operations from the computerized battlefields of Southeast Asia to the demilitarized zones of domestic society, was quite transparent, and this clarification of social power led to a collapse of official ideology on its most important front: collective identity. As the real meaning of modern capitalism's "tyranny of numbers" became apparent, radical opposition emerged as a significant factor in the advanced capitalist polity.

When mere discontent escalated into a more less general offensive against social institutions, however, *illusions about capitalist society were supplanted by illusions about its abolition*. That the possibility of social revolution could assume a chimerical quality was less a result of the inept fabrications of contemporary Bolshevism than of the genuine misconceptions which surrounded the interpretation of the contradictions of advanced capitalism. If it was not at all surprising that the definitive cultural polarization naively anticipated by the New Left never materialized, the *seemingly imminent decline and fall of bourgeois civilization* nonetheless remained a mirage on the horizon of modern revolutionary perspectives in general. But although the subversive processes that undermined the social machinery of Western states in the late Sixties represented a substantial threat to capitalist power, the force of these radicalizing tendencies was mitigated by their sporadic nature and the consistent failure of isolated rebellions to expand, except infrequently, into moments of revolutionary crisis. Indeed, as already demonstrated, the first explosions which accompanied the renewal of social war in advanced class societies were in themselves a false dawn:

everywhere, the results were greatly different from what participants on either side of the battle-lines had predicted. On an international level, the sudden and prolonged repercussions of social conflict in developed capitalism exposed the vulnerability of the entire system to internal attack and revealed its fundamental class character, but at the same time the inability of modern radical currents to sustain momentum beyond an initial spontaneity—as in the case of the highest expression of these tendencies, the French occupation movement of May 1968—revealed a basic deficiency. As long as these currents could not prolong themselves and become ongoing, and organized, movements leading to the positive reconstruction of social activity, they could prevent neither the integration of their practical creativity and theoretical program within the structures of capitalism's nominal opposition—including the mini-bureaucracies spawned by a Leninist revival—nor the manipulation of their rebellious image by capitalism itself. The institutionalization and hence defeat of the intuitive radicalism which characterized modern social revolt marked the passage of this extremism into its other. In the official presentation of contemporary revolt as mere "excess," rebellion became justified on the system's terms as therapeutic and as diversion. But the eventual devolution of modern revolutionary opposition was less the result of a pacification program consciously implemented by capitalism (which was really only capable of the most *ad hoc* responses to its crisis) than of the attenuation of the specific contradictions and issues with which modern radicalism had commenced.

II

Capitalism inherits all the defeats of revolutionary movements. In demonstrating an ability to withstand recent challenges to their authority, in evidencing a certain resiliency in the face of social emergency, the current brokers of political and economic power in advanced societies have gained a temporary victory even as they confront a new social crisis emanating from the intensification of economic contradictions in international capitalism. One of the secondary consequences of this new historical situation is that what were formerly considered to be the most "modern" theses about capitalism now appear outmoded while those previously judged to be "archaic" seem most pertinent. What must be explained is how the most innovative attempts to provide a radical theory of modern social development—and modern social revolution—were overtaken by the very history which made such a project necessary. If in attempting to provide such an explanation our analysis centers around the situationist movement, this obsession is quite admittedly a consequence of our previous involvement with—or rather, commitment to—this movement and the present exigency of confronting our "situationist" past through

an examination of the theory and practice which inspired it. But however arcane such a topic may appear in the light of current issues, it is not unrelated to contemporary reality: although the actual formation of the Situationist International lies outside the radicalization process described in the previous section, the history of the situationist movement encapsulates modern social history, both as the most advanced expression of past opposition to advanced capitalism and as the summarized defeat of this opposition. The study of the origins and implications of this movement leads only in the direction of larger and more "relevant" questions.

The unplanned obsolescence of a radical critique which proclaimed its centrality within the "modern proletarian movement" cannot simply be measured by its external recuperation (the gratuitous appropriation of its terminology and formulations by dominant ideology), but by the progressive diminution of its critical effect. In its displacement from subject of revolutionary critique to object of ultra-leftism's complacent speculation, the extremism that was anticipated by the experimental activity of the Situationist International lost its scandalous aspect, its ability to disturb the world. The collapse of both its pretensions to practical consequence and its immediate theoretical perspectives marked the retreat of the world situationist movement and revealed its newly acquired status as an historical relic.

In view of this, the present failure of the situationist movement is more important to comprehend than its past success; if the critique which emerged from the provisional insights of the S.I. is to go beyond its current paralysis, it must first of all criticize itself, i.e., come to terms with its origins, and through this, become reconciled to its transcendence. The fundamental theses of situationist analysis are no longer directly applicable to contemporary experience, and this irrelevance is not merely due to the fact that the situationist critique of modern capitalism is out of date, but must rather be understood in relation to the weakness of situationist concepts themselves. Moreover, even though the situationist critique had achieved a certain conceptual integrity during the "high period" of its development, and not uncoincidentally, of its influence, theory which does not continually seek to surpass itself as theory, to overcome its critical detachment, loses any effective significance. A lack of such effectiveness proved to be the S.I.'s downfall: it was only in its inability to practically unite its ideas with their assumed medium—the modern proletariat—that the situationist movement acquired an historical specificity, one quite different than intended. The particular status attained by the S.I., that of the most radical example of intellectual opposition to contemporary society, was at once its conspicuous strength and its intrinsic weakness. This contradiction, which characterized the entire attempt of the situationist movement to realize its aspirations to revolutionary practice, was never resolved, and it can only be understood in relation to the precise developmental context of modern

revolutionary formations. Situationist activity represented a specific radical intersection of history: in traversing a specific course of historical transformation, it was conditioned, like any similar phenomenon, by external factors.

According to situationist theory, the social "spectacle" of modern capitalism is to be understood, as, *inter alia*, the "historical moment which contains us" (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*); the spectacle would necessarily therefore enclose the field of its opposition and, in particular, the situationist movement. In fact as well as in theory, the critique of spectacular society developed both within and against the complex of relationships it described. As it attempted to establish its own base of opposition to advanced capitalism, the situationist movement was as much a product of the spectacle whose actuality it sought to disclose as it was an implicit antithesis of "spectacular" thought, and this duality, however much it may appear as a truism, must be grasped in order to explicate the history of the situationist project. The fundamental connection between advanced capitalist development and its situationist interpretation is made in the sphere of culture—considered in its broadest sense as social representation and as activity constituting, or constituted by, that representation — and this explains both why a critique of advanced capitalist culture should lead to a critique of the spectacle and why opposition to modern capitalist society should emerge from its cultural sector in advance of other sectors. But advanced capitalist culture and its avant-garde opposition cannot once again be abstractly separated, as if the first (capitalism) were a proposition which simply called forth its other; to a certain extent, they represent two aspects of the same historical movement. The transformation of traditional capitalist culture corresponded to the rise of advanced capitalism—and the post-war avant-garde. As a part of this avant-garde, the situationist movement was less ahead of historical trends than coincident with them, and however much it later distanced itself from other avant-gardist tendencies, it initially shared all their ambiguities.

To be avant-garde is to be a prisoner of circumstance. Initially, adversary culture appears on the intellectual perimeters of bourgeois society, but it eventually becomes assimilated and made integral to cultural representation as its official criticism. Thus, for the avant-garde, opposition only begins with the struggle against its own deformation, with the abandonment of "apolitical opposition" and the consequent beginnings of self-recognition: an awareness of its equivocality. Critical apprehension of the objective vantage-point of this radicalism formed a precondition to its possible objective expression, and the exact social position occupied by the avant-garde — a position only partially appreciated by its own theorists — revealed the problematic nature of cultural radicalism; the avant-garde's unique status is the result of a general division of labor which places extremist tendencies in the vanguard of cultural transformation without the means to revolutionize such change. Whatever its particular form, intellectual

radicalism is always still-born. Its permanent residence is the space separating ideas from their effectuation, their material significance. While demonstrating the continued relevance of this hardly novel observation, the radicalization of the modern intelligentsia also included a critical effort to overcome the limits imposed by social stratification. In criticizing their origins, i.e., in understanding themselves specifically as part of the intelligentsia, a conscious minority of extremist culture revealed the critical vacuum in which they operated; in exclusively recognizing a goal of revolutionary practice, this radical faction placed its critique beyond the traditional avant-garde.

Unlike its contemporaries, who in embracing leftist politics sought to influence or divert advanced capitalism's intellectual order into "radical" channels, the situationist movement openly declared its intention to enter the intelligentsia as a force against it. The failure of avant-gardist repudiations of bourgeois culture to extend themselves into revolutionary activity marked the limits of a purely intellectual disengagement from capitalism. In trying to revitalize the avant-garde project, even while consciously aware of the previous inadequacies of such a project, the S.I. sought to realize a transcendent synthesis of the cultural and political traditions represented by the avant-garde, and the radical fusion attempted by the S.I.—involving a politicization of extremist culture and a totalization of extremist politics—was meant to signify a rupture with all "specialized opposition." By formulating a critique of the "servility" of intellectuals *vis-à-vis* dominant thought, and from this, of the social function of the intelligentsia as a whole, the situationists, themselves already defectors from the intellectual class, supplied a theoretical program for historical agents that the "submissive" intelligentsia could only passively address. The joining — *in principle* — of radical intellectual theory with forces objectively exterior to it formed the dialectical nexus of modern revolutionary perspectives. This conjunction, which although presumed ineluctable remained only a hypothesis, was concretely expressed in the situationist declaration that "the only important task of contemporary thought must revolve around the question of the organization of the theoretical and material forces of the movement of opposition." (*Domination of Nature, Ideology, and Classes, Internationale Situationniste* #8) But the situationist attempt to delineate a theory of social opposition resulted in an axial contradiction: as it sought to provide a conceptual unity to a diffuse movement that could only be construed as "revolutionary" by inference, such criticism also aimed at its own self-destruction as an intellectual system. The significance of this qualitative predicament was explicitly recognized: "The revolutionary intelligentsia will not be able to realize its project except by suppressing itself; the party of intelligence cannot exist effectively except as a party which supersedes itself: here, victory is at the same time a fall." (*Domination of Nature . . .*)

Theory is practice. Interpretation is itself a kind of intervention, a form of agitation; radical thought, if it is to be anything, must affect consciousness, change reality. Ideas lose their neutrality when they are directly applicable to life, and as a construction of experience, criticism becomes a material force when it communicates a vision of the world which is useful, and thus, capable of implementation. The real practical contribution of the Situationist International was its critique, its ability to name its adversary in describing modern society in precise, but not necessarily thorough, terms. But the theoretical significance of the situationist critique also revealed the real extent of the S.I.'s significance; it ultimately appeared as an intellectual current within the society it contested. And this must be understood in two senses, as a theoretical movement and as a movement of intellectuals; thus, the situationist movement must be explained both in terms of its cultural origins and the intellectual traditions from which it emanated. With respect to the latter, to recognize the situationists' debt to past theory is not to accept the official version of a situationist "lineage" (Marxism, surrealism, etc.), but rather, to insist upon the synthetic character of situationist perspectives: the social criticism elaborated by the Situationist International must be explicated with reference to its critical antecedents, and thus, in terms of the previous theoretical positions which it incorporated. The unoriginality of the S.I.'s theses consisted primarily in their appropriation of ideas from *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (whose contributions have not been fully recognized), but more fundamentally, the direction of the S.I.'s theoretical research was largely predetermined by the intellectual climate in which this inquiry took place. Here, it is not a question of the relation of situationist concepts to other theories (which will be discussed later), but of the general orientation of the situationist project towards certain issues, an orientation which it shared with other tendencies of the period. The situationists inherited a Marxist legacy by default, and this heritage involved the Marx which emerged from the historical polemics of anti-Stalinism. The reconstitution of a theory of capitalism—specifically, of a theory of social alienation—provided the immediate impetus for the radicalization of that cultural sector which would later become the situationist movement. This critical wellspring, however much it remains unexplained in situationist theory itself, nonetheless forms the key to an understanding of the intellectual origins of the situationist "phenomenon."

Marxist theory announced the secret of historical change to be class conflict. But when the first proletarian revolutions of the twentieth century failed, one of the casualties was historical materialism. The Marxist dialectic collapsed not only as a result of its bureaucratic mutilation at the hands of the Third International, but as a consequence of its formalization, its reduction to a series of methodological principles by those who sought to advance

Marxism independently of Bolshevism. This "rehabilitation" of the Marxist critique was identically its embourgeoisification, its incorporation within official ideology as a respectable academic discipline. With the exception of a few ultra-leftist councilist tendencies, whose theoretical concerns were those pertaining to the immediate question of a practical reorganization of the workers' movement in Europe, and isolated figures like Korsch, the only significant radical contributions to emerge in the wake of the pre-World I current of "re-Hegelianized Marxism" were those of the Frankfurt School. The speculative inquiries undertaken in the name of "critical theory" resulted in a comprehensive analysis of modern capitalism in which, following *History and Class Consciousness*, the concepts of totality and reification occupied a central position, and in which psychological criticism and social criticism were fused for the first time in a theory of alienation in modern capitalist society. Even more importantly, in terms of its contemporary relevance, the Frankfurt School directly confronted the problem posed by the "displacement" of class conflict in developed industrial states; however confusedly, it did attempt to offer an explanation for the apparent weakening of proletarian opposition to capitalism in its modern period, specifically, in the most advanced capitalist country, the United States. But the inability of this school to convert its tentative conclusions into a revolutionary theory (theory of the proletariat, of social contradiction and its dynamics) was a crucial factor in its ideologization, its accommodation to the domesticated leftism of bourgeois academia. While the theses of Adorno and Horkheimer prefigured a critique of "spectacular society,"(2) they described a closed universe, a world of absolute fetishism which precluded, in the Freudian language adopted by the Frankfurt School, a "return of the repressed" against capitalist authority. The worldly despair of the European intelligentsia found its justification in critical theory of the post-war period; as the Frankfurt School's negative dialectics passed into mere pessimism, its critique, like the pseudo-Marxism it opposed, congealed into pure method, becoming a construct with no possibility of realization in the world it described.

The Frankfurt School arrived at a sophisticated understanding of the alienation of consciousness in late capitalism, but these insights were surpassed by others who were able to prove the reality of a consciousness of alienation, the existence of a possible radical antithesis to capitalism in the dissatisfaction of the members of a supposedly "one-dimensional" society. Situationist theory was certainly not alone in placing the Marxist problematic of alienation at the very center of its critique; however, it did not simply pose the question of disalienation heuristically, as simply a principle for critical investigation, but considered it as a "concrete reality," as already being present within the active contradictions of capitalist society. Again, the situationists were not the only tendency to do so, and it is perhaps only the way the S.I. made this assertion that distinguished it from other ultra-left currents. Nonetheless, if only because of its influence, the situationist

movement takes precedence over others. This new historicization of dialectical thought not only openly restated the relation of theoretical categories to historical movement, but asserted the primacy of class antagonisms within modern society. The theoretical derivations of the situationists were primarily concerned with discovering the negative possibilities located within present social practice, with liberating the discontented forces hidden behind the modern social contract, the unwritten laws which ensure mass compliance with capitalist power. While outlining a topography of modern alienation in sketching the contours of "other-directed activity" in contemporary society, these critical findings anticipated a general breakdown of social authority in advanced capitalism. By insisting upon the presence of ongoing resistance to the final realization of capital in its authoritarian perfection of a commodity society, the situationist critique predicated (and was itself predicated upon) the emancipation of repressed consciousness; it posited a subjective awareness that would become objectified as historical consciousness. In the words of the S.I., "we have founded our cause on almost nothing, dissatisfaction and the irreducible desire for life" (*The Avant-Garde of Presence*, IS #8): the qualitative immiseration of the modern proletariat represented the essential premise of situationist theory. Concomitantly, this postulate also delimited the terrain of combat in "spectacular" society: modern class struggle was understood as a struggle for the recovery of the human powers surrendered to capitalism in daily activity, and commensurately, as a search for a redefinition of social relations. The situationists were prepared to undertake a reform of consciousness only to the extent that this implied a reform of practice. In generalizing Reason, in communicating a critique of spectacular irrationality, this project sought to generalize "purposive activity." Situationist theory conceptualized an interface of negativity and its opposite: the structures of reinforcement and of routinized self-alienation underlying "spectacular" collectivity. Social activity was made intelligible as activity which was explicitly contradictory, encompassing mass submission to capitalist authority, the unconscious transfer of social power from those who constitute it to those who command it, and covert mass defiance, which expressed the desire to consciously repossess this power on a radical basis. This demarcation of social contradiction indicated areas of open and potential conflict and of congruence (the margins where opposition was most easily neutralized), which corresponded to the shifting points of stress within modern capitalism. In seeking to establish itself within a new "movement to suppress existing conditions," the situationists placed themselves within a continuum of previous radical theory and saw themselves as *the* theorists of contemporary society and its opposition. To the extent that this tendency emphasized its own centrality to an as yet amorphous current of opposition, it was confronted by its real status within the world it criticized.

At the same time that it described the "space-time" of capitalist society—the particular social universe bounded by the institutions of advanced capitalism—the situationist critique outlined the space-time of its positive articulation. The situationists, like all other revolutionary tendencies, located the potential base of their operations within the occupied zones of modern capital and discovered this "terrain of the positive" not as a repository of latent opposition, but as a constantly changing tactical front which became tangible only through the conscious intervention of revolutionary practice. The specific locus of the situationist project was on the qualitative periphery of developed bourgeois culture, as part of a marginal yet vital—in terms of its importance to a pluralistic culture—experimentalism. This sector incorporated modernist cultural tendencies, joining them as an avant-garde—irrespective of whether the more radical expressions of these trends already pointed beyond culture. The prestige conferred upon this cultural vanguard by official publicity was (and is) primarily one of influence, a privileged access to communication within, and thus to, a certain sphere of the existing intellectual order; it was precisely this ability which was seized upon by the S.I. as a potentially radical means of leverage against cultural criticism organized on capitalism's terms. The situationists sought to initiate a systematic sabotage of modern culture by desanctifying its techniques, in employing them as subversive methods and turning the prerogatives enjoyed by its intellectual elite—whose essential luxury is the free disposition of creative time — to their own advantage, and thus, towards supposedly radical ends. The devaluation of bourgeois culture was to a large extent already a *fait accompli*: its demise was presaged in the self-proclaimed "death" of its traditional aesthetic forms. But to go beyond mere post-mortem examination and to affirm what bourgeois culture could no longer affirm, namely, the possibility of a total emancipation of sensory experience, entailed the actual de-privatization, or secularization, of imaginative capacities in the revolutionizing of social praxis. In attempting to accelerate such a development, the situationists saw themselves as comprising an "avant-garde of presence" in direct opposition to those who could only retrace the desultory progress of the "modern spirit" through the various cul-de-sacs of nihilist culture. But the conscious assumption of this putative "forward position" was necessarily an assumption of its inherent ambiguities.

If the situationists rendered all other avant-gardes impossible, simply by exposing the limited vocabulary of artistic innovation, they remained within the ranks of intellectual opposition to "bourgeois values." By revealing the politicized arena in which cultural activity takes place, the situationists demonstrated the fundamental incompatibility of radical culture with its patronage and with the particular social environment in which it flourished. In showing to what ends culture could be put by advanced capitalism,

the situationists indicated the means—in a socially-oriented program of agitation—by which the most radical faction of contemporary culture could make its critique effective, an efficacy which would begin from extra-cultural premises. The distance from cultural to social revolution was the distance traversed theoretically by the situationist movement in its formative period, and this transition marked the limits of the situationist project of a supersession of traditional avant-gardism. Whatever their occasional, limited participation in the social upheavals of the time, the situationists accomplished the transition from cultural to revolutionary criticism in thought only. The situationist movement posed the essential dilemma confronting the radical intelligentsia, and thus, the one confronting the situationists themselves: consciousness which is unable to assert itself practically is placed in an untenable position, where it can either prematurely exhaust its radicalism in an immediate assault on bourgeois culture, an assault which is invariably both superficially scandalous and notoriously superficial, or else resign itself to the anonymity of peripheral opposition. And it was this precarious condition, involving alternate forms of paralysis, which the S.I. both described and ultimately fell victim to.

The situationists' attempt to totalize their critique can be conceived both as a critical endeavor to elaborate a theory of *capitalist* totalization, a comprehensive analysis of the structural development of advanced capitalism and of global social development in general, and as a practical effort to link their activity with a totalized class, the "modern proletariat," the salaried work-force (and those excluded from this work force by capital), which the situationists saw as capable of assuming the "world-historical task" originally set by Marx for the industrial working class. However, in seeking to externalize their activity, to project it outward as an inciting force, the situationists encountered their own externality, their objective removal from the proletarian movement whose "unknown theory" they claimed to provide. By taking their *déclassé* status literally, the situationists addressed the proletariat from a position of at least theoretical strength, in other words, without any illusions as to traditional proletarian "qualities." But at the same time, they acquired new illusions concerning the advantages of their own anomalous social position: thus, during the orientation debate of 1969-1971, a situationist could say, "We are at the intersection point of all classes, and thus, we are no longer in any class." This itself reflected the vestiges of a certain cultural outlook in the situationists' position; the situationists appeared as the concentrated unification *en avance* of the proletarian struggle. Moreover, despite the situationists' intention to effect a "radical separation from the world of separation," their critique itself became separate from the society it criticized and from the history it sought to enter into. But while the situationists were finally unable to actually organize an expansive revolutionary practice, to enlarge the field of their agitation after the brief generalization of

situationist activity during May 1968, they nonetheless understood what historical direction any attempt to "realize" their ideas would take. For the S.I., the determining situation of their project, one from which all other situations could be created, was embodied in the necessary encounter (necessary from the standpoint of the situationists, not from that of history) between modern radical theory and modern proletarian activity.

Now that this effort of situationists to become revolutionaries rather than theorists of revolution is a thing of the past, and thus can be viewed retrospectively, from a secure position after the fact, the essential error, the one from which all other errors would follow, appears in the situationists' understanding of consciousness, and more precisely, of how consciousness would be acquired by the proletariat. The paradox of a revolutionary intelligentsia was reflected in the S.I.'s perspective on the possible radicalization of modern society, a perspective which contained an inherent contradiction: on the one hand, the situationists maintained that their ideas were already in "everyone's minds"—that the elaboration of situationist theory did not depend on the existence of an S.I., but would be developed independently by workers themselves—while on the other, they proposed an activist role for theory, whose introduction into proletarian struggles would contribute to the formation of revolutionary class consciousness. This contradiction between spontaneism and activism in situationist theses was never resolved. Even during the post-May period, when the situationists had begun to sense, without fully recognizing, their distance from the class to which they ascribed fantastic powers, they still maintained that their theoretical program coincided with the *changing realities of proletarian practice*, and that the task still remained, purely and simply, the fusion of radical ideas with the workers' "movement." This self-deception, which was prolonged by certain delusions of an already-lost situationist grandeur, had its inevitable consequences: when the acute discrepancy between a subject conceived as the living negation of capitalist power and the living actuality of this subject became so apparent that no one, even the most intoxicated veterans of May '68, could ignore it, the opportunity for a critical redirection had already been lost.

Debord and Sanguinetti's statement in *61 Theses on the S.I. and Its Time* that "it is not a question of the S.I.'s theory, but of the proletariat's theory" showed how far they still were from resolving the problems that had led to the break-up of the S.I., a dissolution that was less the consequence of its internal disputes than of its external (collective) failure. By a theoretical sleight-of-hand, the situationists reduced the question of a proletarian theory to a matter of a theory belonging to the proletariat. Instead of an elaboration of the real tendencies (not simply the general direction) of modern social conflict, a process which implied an understanding of the precise context in which social practice was then evolving and the exact forms it assumed, the situationists saw their central task to be that of perfecting a situationist practice, of popularizing radical ideas by making them an actual, rather than

theoretical, part of the "class struggle." If this exigency was imposed by historical circumstances, the situationists nonetheless derived their solution to the problem posed by agitation (or lack of same) less from history than from their preconceptions as to how the workers *should* meet the revolutionary program of the S.I. This meeting would take place on theory's own terms: the workers were to come to their avowed partisans, and not the other way around. In refusing to subordinate their demands to those of other potentially revolutionary elements, even when certain struggles posed the essential demand of an assumption of social power by the proletariat, the situationists nevertheless attempted to chart a possible "terrain of communication" where their project and that of the radicalized elements of the proletariat would converge. Critical speculation about such an eventuality revolved around two crucial aspects: the need to devise new means of theoretical communication, to transmit theory in such a way as to effectively transcend the politics of constituencies, and the determination of the basis on which this dialogue would proceed. The search for a common ground with the proletariat was based on the premise that the formation of a revolutionary movement would occur on the level of the "qualitative," that total opposition to capitalist power would rise above exterior definition and determine its own course as a force already "autonomous" even as it moved towards its realization of revolutionary autonomy. Given this scenario, nothing would inhibit the penetration of situationist ideas into proletarian sectors; the possibility that certain objective constraints (such as the virtual class barrier separating the situationists from their proletarian followers, a barrier which still existed despite all situationist efforts to surmount it) could prevent the initiation of an authentic practice was excluded from the realm of situationist possibility. Once these limits had indeed become insuperable obstacles to the situationist project, the S.I. could only resort to illusory resolutions of its crisis: in a supreme act of theoretical will, the separation between intellectuals organizing themselves around a proletarian theory and a class organized on the basis of capitalist production was merely abolished by fiat. Having been frustrated in their hopes of conducting a successful agitation in the "worker milieu," the situationists simply cut the Gordian knot presented by practice and artificially subsumed themselves under a general proletarian "movement," where the S.I. became only a particular aspect of this whole. By means of such a reversal of perspective, the question was no longer that the workers would become dialecticians, but whether the dialecticians would become, or already were, workers.

For all the situationists' concern with the practical consequences of their activity, they were finally unable to accomplish a positive supersession of political militancy. While demonstrating the hierarchical relationship implicit in the proselytizations of even the most libertarian leftist sect, these anti-politicians practiced a kind of rigorous, ultimately irrelevant abstentionism. In purposely withdrawing from the "spectacular" arena of legislative and economic demands, they posed a radical

alternative, represented in the "total subversion" of existing society. But with occasional exceptions—such as the Strasbourg "scandal" and the situationist interventions in May '68, both of which seem much less important now than they did at the time—the situationists were unable to implement their subversive program, even on a tactical level, and these revolutionaries without a revolution came to occupy a depoliticized vacuum in which a purist disdain for "activism" was substituted for sustained revolutionary activity. Real consideration of a situationist practice was deferred until such a time as an autonomous current appeared within the proletariat, and specifically, among the "workers." But when, after May 1968, workers did manifest their autonomy in advanced capitalist countries, in ways and forms quite different than the S.I. had imagined (as, for example, in Italy, where the workers' group *Autonomia Operaia* formulated a councilist program and practice while retaining a Leninist conception of the need for a vanguard party), the situationists, who awaited the international extension of the days of May, were not in a position to communicate directly with them, much less establish a "common project" with them. However much it would later be dismissed by its initiators, the success of the S.I. in the universities was not immaterial as to where its real effect was, and would be, felt; the intellectual prestige enjoyed by the situationists was not only an indication of the celebrity status they had acquired, but marked the actual practical orientation of the S.I. The S.I. chose its audience as much as its audience chose the S.I., and the means which the situationists used to express their ideas led to inevitable conclusions. The concentration of situationist propaganda within the intelligentsia was no mere accident: situationist theory, in spite of all its protests to the contrary, remained a theory of a radical intelligentsia.

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When Raoul Vaneigem said in *The Totality for Kids* that "we accept the hierarchical framework in which we are placed, waiting impatiently to abolish our domination of others, others we can only dominate on the grounds of our criteria against domination," he openly confronted the dilemma of a new International originating in the intelligentsia, but even this candor did not prevent the situationists from becoming a *de facto* hierarchy, exerting authority over the modern revolutionary movement by virtue of their "advanced" theoretical position. After May '68, the increasingly widespread dissemination of situationist theory only reinforced the S.I.'s exclusive status within the "modern revolutionary movement" it proclaimed. The situationists' exclusivity can be understood both in terms of their absolute defense against all "ideological" approximation of situationist theory and, more importantly, with respect to the S.I.'s external relation to radicalized sectors of the proletariat. This relationship was determined by and formalized in the organizational role which the S.I. ascribed to itself, that of being a

theoretical representation of the forces opposing the spectacle. If the situationists disavowed speaking on behalf of others as a leadership, they nonetheless "represented the interests of the movement as a whole," speaking for (and to) others from a position of theoretical superiority. The much-discussed "elitism" of the S.I. (which was a convenient target for its enemies and an aspect of its history conveniently overlooked by its apologists) was thus not simply imposed by existing social stratifications, but was a necessary consequence of the S.I.'s own perspective of power. While distinguishing itself within the modern revolutionary camp on the basis of a polemic with its perceived adversaries, the S.I. also differentiated itself from the proletarian movement in general by virtue of its possession of theory. And by doing so, the S.I. tacitly presented itself as a repository of radical consciousness within a world systematically deprived of such perception, and thus became the "intelligence of a world without intelligence." Through this, the S.I. placed itself on a qualitatively different plane of understanding from the proletariat, on a level to which the latter would have to ascend. An avant-gardist posture was forced upon the situationists, but it was an attitude to which they rapidly grew accustomed and, by default, eventually accepted. The desire to universalize the situationist project provided the *raison d'être* for a new revolutionary directorate, which would be all the more powerful because it would have none of the appearances of power. Like previous radical vanguards, this informal leadership would exercise a certain monopoly, in this case, a theoretical one: under the benign guidance of masters who were "without slaves" but who did have a "unitary critique," the proletariat would exist in an objective state of tutelage as it progressed towards self-consciousness.

An organization is able to function effectively as an international revolutionary force when it is sustained by and contributes to the development of international currents of opposition to existing social authority. But however much it may emphasize the necessarily *global* character of modern class conflict, an organization only becomes an International to the extent that it becomes a means to the internationalization of revolutionary struggles, and thus establishes itself at the practical epicenter of class warfare in its various contemporary forms. An obvious precondition to the attainment of such a position is the internationalization of the organization's or tendency's theory, and through this, the achievement of a definitive victory in the realm of current ideas about the world. This process, however, is distinct from, and far less ambitious than, the further requirement of the internationalization of radical practice and the actual formation of a worldwide revolutionary movement. Of these two criteria, the S.I. was only able to fulfill the first; having successfully proliferated its theses as revolutionary theory, as ideas which revolutionized, in however limited a context, contemporary social consciousness, in such a way as to ensure their maximum effect, the S.I. began to disintegrate both when it seriously attempted to transcend the

traditional geographic boundaries of situationist activity, the inherent bias towards France as the center of its membership and hence, its operations, and even more importantly, when it attempted to overcome the social boundaries that confined its influence to an intellectual milieu.

However incapacitated the S.I. may have been, the dissolution of the situationist movement cannot be explained solely in terms of a subjective failure. The S.I.'s internal dissensions notwithstanding, the collapse of situationist practice at this time must be viewed in relation to the evolution of social crisis in modern capitalism. During this period, the contradictions within advanced capitalist society intensified in certain areas and diminished in others, and this specification of social conflict did not conform to the predictions of situationist theory, which heralded an epoch in which student rebellion would give way before proletarian revolt. Reality is always more complex than any such expectations, however: even when a specifically proletarian stage of radical activity was inaugurated in Italy (and there only under specific circumstances which were not to be found elsewhere at that time), the "obsolete" student revolt in fact expanded in other countries as the issues that defined it remained relevant. And when the international youth rebellion did collapse, it did not do so in the face of an even more radical movement. The dissipation of the radical social currents in which the situationist movement had flourished was the real cause of the decline and fall of the Situationist International. The changing nature of modern social conflict altered the conditions under which a practical agitation such as that conceived by the S.I. could be conducted, and the situationists proved unable to fully accommodate themselves to this shift in historical movement. From this point on, the history of the S.I. appears as only one specific aspect of recent social history, and not, as the S.I. would have had it, the concentrated expression of that history. Situationist practice was predicated on the open and direct manifestation of class struggle in advanced capitalism, and it was paralyzed both when this class struggle did not appear and when it did appear in forms not anticipated by the S.I. The inability of the situationists to formulate, much less implement, a theoretical program commensurate with the new realities of class struggle left them outside of history, that is, outside the terrain of social change in the modern world. The real break involving the S.I. was less a matter of its organizational scission than one of a definitive rupture between the situationists and social reality. From an initial radical convergence, both were to go their separate ways.

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The revolutionary events of 1968 were at the time correctly seen as an historical vindication of the situationist critique; with these developments, as the S.I. itself maintained, "theory (was) confirmed. It (was) immensely reinforced." (René Viénet, *Enragés et*

Situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations) When situationist practice found its content for the first time conclusively substantiated in contemporary social practice, in the actions of individuals who themselves announced the appearance of a modern revolutionary movement, the S.I. attained a genuinely historical status, one with a concrete significance. In demonstrating its objective truth, the situationist critique entered irreversibly into social history, achieving an independent existence outside of the S.I. Here, however, the victory of an autonomous situationist theory coincided with the defeat of the S.I. itself; having made history, the S.I. (and its theoretical perspective) became history, and thus became subject to historical representation as well as to historical corroboration. In retrospect, May 1968 appears as the *ne plus ultra* of the situationist movement, as the completion of the theoretical project embodied in the S.I., and that it could be completed in such a way revealed its fundamental limitations. But if the movement of occupations represented the high-water mark of situationist activity, it is necessary to understand why it broke off at that level.

Far from having been propelled to a real (as opposed to hypothetical) forward position in the proletarian currents which materialized in the wake of the revolutionary crisis in France, the S.I. was literally left stranded by the May tide: when this particular wave of radicalization in European society receded, the immediate assumptions of situationist practice no longer obtained. If, after May, "nothing could go on as before," the situationists understood that it was last of all the S.I. which could do so, and yet it was precisely such a continuation which took place. In this period, the S.I. remained unchanged in its structure (a fact which indicated a certain failure to perceive the necessity of developing the new organizational forms required by the increasing tempo of social conflict) and more importantly, its function as a theoretical avant-garde. The S.I. believed that it would encounter the new revolutionary elements on a theoretical level, i.e., on the basis of its critique; what would change would not be the content of situationist theory, but the context in which this theory would be communicated. Any subsequent theoretical development on the part of the S.I. would be predicated on the transposition of its activity to a new social plane. This time, however, the S.I. did not appear as the intellectual precursor of an as yet unformed revolutionary movement, but as the interpreter of a proletariat which it saw as already "in revolt." When this "objectively" revolutionary class displayed a remarkable immunity to situationist analysis, remaining largely unaffected by the S.I.'s *post festum* commentaries about the "revolt against work," the real extent of the S.I.'s influence became known. Situationist practice was confined, as before, to the outer fringes of radical activity; whatever impact the S.I. had on the post-68 radical tendencies was based exclusively on the residual effect of its previously elaborated theses. Situationist theory had become a static force.

The historical impasse which the S.I. had reached by 1970 forced it to resort to extreme measures — ones, however,

which only parodied the radical extremism on which the S.I. had founded its activity. In compensating for its isolation from the social forces on which it had made its project dependent, the S.I. displayed an untypical naivete by more or less overtly appealing to the "workers" to assume their historical responsibilities as the sole agents of revolutionary transformation. This recourse to an already archaic form of *ouvrierisme* was reflected in the situationists' increasing obsession with the strategic location of industrial workers in the capitalist economy, a fixation which not only placed them in the miserable company of the Left they despised but which grew in direct proportion to the S.I.'s increasing isolation from this stratum. Finding an unlikely inspiration in Lenin, the S.I. crudely viewed productive sectors as the "motor" of the proletariat, and thus necessarily the driving force of modern class conflict; this simplistic conception was compounded by the situationists' panegyrics to the industrial working class, whose actions, whatever their immediate form or content, were invariably acclaimed as the opening rounds of the Social Revolution. However, these advanced symptoms of "radical" autosuggestion merely revealed the inability of the S.I. to extend the objective base of its practice beyond the exclusive confines of its readership, and when this failure became manifest, the S.I. turned its critical wrath on itself and its constituency.

The decisive importance which the critique of its camp-followers—the pro-situ—was to assume for the S.I. in its later period was itself an indication of a terminal stage in the development of situationist theory. Far from being an "infantile disorder" of the situationist movement, the appearance of the pro-situ was merely an exaggerated sign of the accumulated contradictions of the S.I. In encountering the pro-situ, the S.I. confronted the positive as well as negative aspect of its success: it encountered its own determinateness, its social origins, and hence, its specific character as an historical formation. If the pro-situ was a barrier to the further progress of the S.I., it was only in the sense that the contemplation of the S.I. signified, along with other quite different phenomena, the qualitative barrier to the development of the situationist project. The S.I. recognized the existence of the pro-situ as a necessary result of the radicalization of specific social strata in advanced capitalism, but not as a necessary result of the situationist project itself. In effect, the S.I.'s despising of the pro-situ, stripped of its polemical content, appears as self-despisement: the S.I. could only reproach the pro-situ for being everything the S.I. had made them, for existing as a consequence of the particular manner in which situationist ideas had been diffused within modern history. The existence of an essentially passive mass of partisans to the situationist cause was an inevitable product of this diffusion, which was confined largely to cultural, professional, and educational sectors (a fact which provided the objective basis for the pro-situ "regression") and in which the S.I. appeared implicitly as a model of revolutionary superiority (a role which determined the subjective character of the

pro-situ's adherence to the S.I.). The pro-situ "stratum" was thus defined both by its social position and by the ideological program which served as the "consciousness" of this pseudo-class. In attempting to account for its "progeny," the S.I. wished to deny any organic connection between itself and what were, in a real sense, its disciples; the S.I. sought to distance itself from the pro-situ, not only on a necessary critical level, but also historically and socially. But when, in the *61 Theses* . . . , the S.I. made such an obvious display of its contempt for students and for the entire pro-situ "milieu," it only drew attention to the situationists' own origins within the radical intelligentsia. Moreover, the pro-situ phenomenon was recognized by the S.I. as a superficial aspect of a larger crisis, but this fundamental crisis of the S.I. was still not perceived in its full dimensions, as a socio-historical crisis.

While the S.I.'s criticism of the pro-situ was explicitly a self-criticism of the S.I., its real value lay in what it unintentionally revealed about the critical power of the S.I. at this point. *61 Theses* marked the stagnation of the S.I.'s conceptual progress, and this arrestment of theoretical development would eventually appear as a definite regression, indicating the collapse of the situationist critique into itself. The descent of situationist theory from a plane of historical analysis was already evident in its treatment of the subculture surrounding it: the S.I. considered the pro-situ (in the words of *61 Theses* . . .) as a "sociological phenomenon" and went on to construct *in abstracto* a typology of the social origins and behavior of the pro-situ. By isolating the subject of its analysis from historical causation, such a methodological procedure lent itself to a rigid separation between "subjective" (those provided by the situationist movement) and "objective" (those provided by history) determinants of situationist activity, and ultimately between that activity and its real foundation. What was lost in this distinction was precisely an understanding of the dynamic unity of the internal and external aspects of the S.I.'s crisis. Ultimately, this connection was made for the S.I. by history: the disintegration of the situationist movement occurs as part of historical movement, coming at the conclusion of a specific phase of radical opposition enclosed within the post-war period, that is, after what were then the "modern revolutionary currents" had reached the zenith of their development. Ironically, it was precisely at this moment that the S.I. chose to proclaim its "victory" and to affirm the concrete relationship of the situationist movement to historical transformation, the S.I. being an advanced expression of the radical aspect of such change. In this context, the S.I.'s theoretical introspection, far from preparing the way for a superior stage of situationist activity, occurs as a critique *in extremis*, but one which did not even succeed in achieving a certain lucidity "before the grave."

During its declining period, the S.I. was certainly not unaware of the increasingly prevalent ideological deformation of its theses, and the critique of the pro-situ was in its very essence an attempt to account for the manifestation of a situationist ideology within the intellectual culture of modern society. Debord and Sanguinetti were

even prepared to admit the complicity of the S.I. in its own "recuperation"; however, what they failed to see was that the ideologization of situationist theory did not stop at their door either, or end with the exclusion of an "ideological" tendency within the S.I. For quite expedient reasons—to do so would have undermined the whole basis of Debord and Sanguinetti's imposture that the S.I. after its "purification" could continue on a new course—the late S.I. did not describe its own participation in the degeneration of its theory. In fact, *61 Theses* . . . indicated that situationist theory had already become an ideology for the S.I. itself; by tacitly declaring that the S.I.'s theoretical work had essentially been completed, and that what remained was the implementation of an already-elaborated program, Debord and Sanguinetti disclosed that the S.I. could no longer undertake the "critique of existing conditions." It would be erroneous to attribute this relinquishment of a historical task to a "subjective failure" since it was not so much the insufficiencies of certain past theorists that concluded the theoretical development of the situationist movement, but the general insufficiency of situationist theory itself. Furthermore, the S.I. was not alone in its inability to explain the real basis of its crisis: all the various remnants of the situationist movement were united by virtue of the collective impoverishment of their proposals to supersede the S.I. Vaneigem, for instance, could only exchange the complacency of the S.I. for an extremist despair, as evidenced in his *Postscript* to the second French edition of his *Treatise*. While Vaneigem's analysis of the recuperation of situationist ideas retains no illusions as to the revival of the situationist project in any of its previous forms, his rejection of a theory without practice ends up in an abstract renunciation of theory itself in favor of an equally abstract notion of the "revolutionary deed." In the end, both Vaneigem, in his pathetic caricature of his previous style, and the official S.I., in its hyperbolic description of its real impact on the world, became the equivalent of the "anti-historical man" vilified in *61 Theses* . . . The idle boast that "the more famous our theses become, the more obscure we ourselves will be" was more accurate than the S.I. ever imagined—in fact, the S.I. achieved obscurity in its *unimportance*, its irrelevance to social development in the period following its collapse. The inglorious end of the S.I. has not left its "famous" theses unscathed—the failure of the S.I. in May 1968 and afterwards can only be understood in terms of the deficiencies inherent in situationist theory.

III

To know is to name; to name is to choose. Description which rises above mere observation involves a conscious differentiation of the information at its disposal. Criticism is thus both selection and manipulation, an ordering of intelligibility on the basis of what this

knowledge opens up. Interpretive thought returns as an active agent, as partisan explanation, to its source in the reality it perceives and then confronts. To the extent that consciousness can be construed as "to itself its own notion"—if it is led on by its own discoveries—its insights must also be signposts of change, of a transformation which begins first of all in the relation of understanding to the world it seeks to comprehend. The self-movement of ideas only becomes important where critical development relates itself to, and becomes a decisive part of—historical movement. Theoretical construction is inseparably historical construction: ideas unfold objectively within an historical continuum, and social theory distinguishes itself precisely on the basis of a consciousness of the content of its elaboration. Criticism criticizes in order to establish "the truth of this world," a truth which appears as contradiction, namely, as social conflict. Here, the radical organization of significance is a precondition to the radical reorganization of society. But theory cannot simply be evaluated in terms of its orientation—its practical intent. The problem of actualizing theory is inseparable from the question of theorizing about actuality. Radical thought *per se* must be considered on its own terms, that it to say, it must be considered theoretically. As abstraction from reality, as conceptualization of that reality in its transformative process, analysis itself provides the criteria by which it is to be judged. These standards are both internal, relating strictly to the propositions advanced by criticism, and external, serving to measure a theoretical perspective in terms of its real effect upon the world. From the standpoint of theory, however, the correspondence between history and its critical representation is only provisional. Any critique is only "for the moment") its tentativeness derives from its very claim to relevance. The contributions of theoretical knowledge to the modern revolutionary project are inconclusive, not simply because they only potentially form a material power, but because they are open-ended, and hence, indefinite. Radical criticism implies its own revision, its own correction; but it cannot anticipate (except by prior recourse to an empty *caveat*) its own displacement. Reality delivers its own practical lesson, however; the power of negative thinking extends no further than the force of its critical argument.

In what it makes known and *how* it communicates this intelligence, criticism reveals its own self-interest. The theoretical definition of concepts is also a definition of theory's objectives. While orthodox thought disguises its predispositions within the general bias of bourgeois methodology, radical interpretation distinguishes itself by openly declaring its partiality. This candor allows theory to be assessed in terms of what it set out to achieve, namely, a comprehensive understanding of modern historical movement and of the role this understanding can play in influencing it. And the present stasis of situationist theory only becomes apparent when its results are compared with these original goals.

The S.I.'s assertion during its 1970 orientation debate that "the only theory is situationist" was less a self-serving statement than a conscious affirmation of the exceptionality—the *sui generis* character—of the situationist critique. However, situationist theory was not the only theory of modern capitalism, but only one among many competing interpretations of contemporary society; the uniqueness of situationist analysis derived from its attempt to provide a theoretical construction of this reality as an organic whole. However flawed such a construction may ultimately have been, the S.I. differentiated itself from other tendencies on the basis of its intended comprehensiveness; situationist criticism specified the organizing principles of advanced capitalist society, not simply as general contours of its evolution, but as determinants of a specific integrated formation and hence, as the bases of a precise form of social reproduction. Beginning from an obvious — and hardly original — perception that daily life, mass culture, and social ideology in modern capitalism were constituted on the basis of commodity production, the S.I. made a further necessary distinction: these categories were themselves active, *constituent* elements of the total production of commodity society. This distinction was itself not entirely novel, and in comparison to the prior theoretical work of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* tendency, the entire critical work of the S.I. appears as quite naive; what was innovative about situationist theory, however, was its apprehension of advanced capitalism as a new *form* of society. In understanding the objective deployment of social power and its correlative, the objective unfolding of praxis, as taking place within a unified plane of historical development, as comprising a specific *mode* of accumulation of social capital, situationist analysis presented a qualitative model of modern social organization. And if this paradigm sought to elaborate the structures of advanced capitalism it was obviously itself structured accordingly, i.e., along the same developmental axes it established for contemporary society. The structure of situationist theory must be understood in relation to its analytic procedure. In order to explain situationist theory, one must first of all explain how it arrived at a comprehension of its object. Situationist methodology must be explicated.

Situationist theory was distinguished not so much by its terminology, much of which was derived from other sources, as by its conceptual framework, the critical premises of its interpretation of modern capitalism. And these assumptions were not simply those of Marx transposed to a modern context. While situationist thought was epistemologically grounded in Marxian dialectics (it based itself on the theory of knowledge — of its possibilities and its necessary orientation — which was fundamental to Marx's work, and on the form of articulation of that knowledge presented in Marx), its inquiry was framed by concerns which were only implicit in Marx; the scope of situationist analysis corresponded to the expanded dimensions of modern capitalist development. In the case of the S.I.,

it was less a question of applying historical materialism to subjects not treated by Marx than it was one of reconceptualizing the nature of capitalist society as a structural totality. The initial difference between the Marxist and situationist analyses of capital is one of emphasis: whereas Marx was concerned with delineating the structure of the commodity economy and the role of this economy as a determining social force, the situationists were preoccupied with describing the structure of commodity society as a determined form. To insist upon such a difference in stress does not merely involve a facile distinction — although Marx's theory of the capitalist economy was identically a theory of capitalist society, the centrality which the latter was to assume in the situationist critique was indicative of a decisive shift in theoretical orientation, one which in part explains both the strengths and weaknesses of this tendency. Situationist theory did not concentrate on the material basis of modern capitalism, but on the social structure in which this development took place.

In situationist theory, the concept of *spectacle* (3) assumes the methodological importance which the category of commodity has for Marx. This concept appears both as the starting point for theoretical investigation and as the unifying principle of that investigation, in that it defines the analytical plane of situationist criticism as the plane in which social organization develops. The theory of the "spectacle" is a theory of social organization: in attempting to specify the modalities of modern capitalist society, it interprets them in relation to an underlying determining structure, i.e., with respect to the general form or system in which they evolve. On this level, the relative significance between "commodity" and "spectacle" becomes absolute: the spectacle is defined as the "total commodity" (Debord), as the objectified result of alienated practice within capitalist society. ("Objectified" and "alienated" are not understood here as being synonymous; in other words, "alienation" can only be understood as the specific form of objectification in capitalism.) Like the commodity, the spectacle is considered as a "phenomenal form," as being at once a concrete manifestation, and the form of mediation, of social relations. If the spectacle represents the truth of the commodity, in other words, represents the modern realization of commodity relations, it nonetheless displaces the commodity as the principal structure of capitalist society. Debord's "correction" of Marx — "the entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*" — can be understood in no other sense.

The "society of the spectacle" arises with the consolidation of commodity culture, appearing initially as the consequence of the extensive and intensive development of the superstructure of capitalist production (a superstructure which in actuality comprises a multiplicity of political, economic, and cultural superstructures). In fact, the spectacle as construed in situationist theory is nothing more than the capitalist superstructure at the moment when it attains an apparent autonomy, when it develops for itself as an active, creative force. Far from being a mere passive reflection of a given

material base, the cultural sector of modern capitalist society acquires a quasi-independent role. Even as it retains its ultimate dependence on productive forces, it exhibits certain autogenous features. Here, ideology is a material power. The spectacle, thus, does not simply occur as a linear extension of capitalist progress, as a simple function of a certain level of economic development; it only manifests itself at the point when the capitalist superstructure, as the objective representation of bourgeois society, confronts, or engages, that society. Engels's old, undialectical adage about the passage of quantity into quality is not, whatever Debord may say, confirmed in the spectacle, which cannot be measured by the degree of capitalist accumulation attained therein, but by the degree to which this accumulation is externalized in the realm of ruling ideas and ruling appearances. Spectacular society, however, does not reside solely in the sphere of social appearance, nor is it based on a dichotomy between (organized) representation and (organized) reality; rather, the spectacle — to the extent that capitalist society can be conceived to be "spectacular" — must be conceived of as a process (or as a concatenation of processes), of which the "play of appearances" is only one aspect. Modern capitalist society unifies the spheres of production, consumption, and culture within an integrated social complex, one which achieves a transcendent reality above any of its particular dimensions. On a most rudimentary level, spectacular organization imposes itself as a lateral division across these individual spheres and bisects society as a whole along the axis of externalizing activity and its necessary complement, externalized social reality, the total result of social objectification. The spectacle develops as the formalized mediation of base and superstructures in capitalist society, and in spectacular organization, this dialectic attains a new complexity: culture in its generic sense is not simply contrasted to material reality; rather, the two categories are joined on the basis of an integrated — and transformative — whole. Production, as the driving element of social reproduction, is not confined to strictly economic activity; in situationist theory, Marx's analysis of material production as being identically the reproduction of productive structures achieves a broader significance. With the emergence of spectacular society, the goal of capitalist production is no longer the reproduction of the immediate presuppositions of the commodity economy (capital, labor, etc.) but the reproduction of a social totality: "the spectacle is the main production of present-day society." (Debord) But even here, what is reproduced never leaves the sphere of production: not only does it form the total objectified product of society, it returns directly to the labor process as the activating power of that process. The "externality" of the superstructure is therefore only relative, since in the spectacle, the sphere of production extends into the superstructure as the production of consciousness. The unity of spectacular social organization consists in this: the spheres which are dependent on production are joined at both the base and the apex of society, in both the economy and the culture of the spectacle. Spectacular society is characterized by the synthesis of

its essential categories: consumption appears both as a corollary of production and as a component of ideology; production encompasses both economic development and the general environment in which this development takes place; and culture manifests itself as both detached from and connected to material structures.

The theory of the spectacle involves, and indeed contains at its very origins, a "value judgement": contemporary society only becomes intelligible as spectacle when it is considered as an alienated form and as a form of alienation. "Spectacle" — that which is beheld — as a term denotes something both extra-ordinary and immense, and its connotations of representational culture, specifically, dramatic art, cannot be minimized. The description of modern capitalism as spectacular situates theoretical criticism within an analytical context of representation: it asserts that in this society, "everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation." And with this assertion, the emphasis of criticism moves from portrayal (or image) to what is portrayed (or what the image expresses): the spectacle is construed as representing alienation, not simply as its equivalent, but as its source. In situationist theory, the theme of the spectacle thus becomes inseparable from those of estrangement, isolation, and loss. The spectacle becomes the primary division (dividing humanity from the product of its activity and dividing humanity from itself) from which all others emanate; it appears as an "alien power" and as the "portrait" of this separation. But the spectacle is neither a separate entity, nor is it simply a mode of representation; while based on an historically determined separation between social class (the modern proletariat) and social product, between this class and itself, it is, as Debord says, the "instrument of unification." It is on the level of unification that spectacular hegemony reveals its complexity, and it is precisely this quality of spectacular social organization that situationist theory only partially recognized. If it succeeded in establishing the underlying unity of existing social conditions, it was nevertheless unable to fully elaborate the various aspects of this cohesion.

In its most elementary significance, the "spectacle" can be interpreted as a kind of mediating screen, as a set of integrating signs and structures determining the essential features of contemporary social organization. The spectacle can be conceived of as an apparitional plane on which social activity takes place and is made to appear, encompassing a reflecting surface of social appearance and a determining matrix of social practice. Considered in terms of its morphology, the spectacle is thus both representational and differential, both a screen and a screening process, in that it not only embodies existing social meaning, containing both the image and goal of social development, but superimposes itself as a structuring force upon contemporary existence. The "permanent presence" of the spectacle cannot be understood as a fixed authority. It involves, rather, a process of incorporation which channels activity in a definite direction and towards determined

ends. The spectacle is itself based on the existing social division of labor, and the project of spectacular society is identically the development of modern productive forces. But if capitalist accumulation is the spectacle's *raison d'être*, the spectacle is not simply "capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image," (Debord) but, rather, a social economy. The spectacle imposes itself as the exterior and interior unity of capitalist society, unifying the diverse moments of the realization of social capital within a practical and ideological configuration and sanctioning this whole as the whole of what is "real." The legitimation process of the spectacle is not, however, limited to the moment when it "shows itself," i.e., in the collective image of the spectacle — it is, rather, a continuous enterprise which is rooted in the basic structures of social life (work, consumption, culture, education, family, etc.). The intensity of spectacular domination can only be understood in terms of the pervasiveness of that power: spectacular social organization entails nothing less than the total socialization of human practice. Here, all elements of activity are charged with a social content: the absolutism of modern capitalist power joins diverse elements in a single process of quantification and valorization (the standardization of life on the basis of exchange), as moments imbued with official quality and reconstituted as total spectacle. This penetration of capitalist authority has obvious consequences for social and individual consciousness, and spectacular hegemony must be interpreted in terms of its objective and *subjective* dimensions. Spectacular organization is at its very base an organization of perception and behavior; it defines what is to be seen and how it is to be perceived, and this determination of consciousness is identically a definition of activity, of what is permitted within prevailing society. The alienation which is at the root of modern bourgeois life thus unfolds on an ontological as well as social plane; it involves the modification of the nature of social being. Class struggle is waged both without and within *Homo economicus*, and this divided reality forms the only possible starting point for radical criticism.

If, as Debord states, the spectacle must be conceived of as the means of existing social unification, its definition cannot be reduced to either the "image of the ruling economy" or the "moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life." It is, rather, the form of this economy and the form of this occupation. But the spectacle is not a purely structural entity, and it cannot be defined simply as the total structure of modern social praxis, nor can its mechanics be isolated independently of the processes which they regulate. The spectacle is, more correctly, a system, permutable yet constant, which incorporates numerous structures, all of which have a profoundly historical content. In terms of its methodological criteria, the theory of the spectacle distinguishes itself from structuralist analysis: the object of situationist analysis is not a meta-historical structure of power, but a specific process of social development. The historical bias of the *situationist critique*, however, does not ensure its definitiveness or

obviate any of its conceptual difficulties: situationist theory must be held accountable to its claims of historical analysis. Any critical examination of the theory of spectacle also encounters this theory's limitations, its insufficiencies as an explanation of contemporary social history. The theory of the spectacle corresponds to, and is a description of, a specific type of capitalist society, a specific phase of its evolution; once this specificity (and the historical specificity of its critique) is lost, the distance between the critique of spectacular society and "ideology" disappears. The critical perspective of the S.I. contained the seeds of its own destruction: situationist theses had their own anti-historical moments.

In situationist analysis, the concept of spectacle appears as both a theory of a distinct type of society, that of advanced capitalism, and of a world formation — international capitalism. But the situationist attempt to theoretically constitute the spectacle as both a localized and generalized phenomenon does not succeed. Although "the concept of the spectacle unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena," it only provides an illusory explanation of contemporary world history. By treating the spectacle as a global category in the manner that it does, situationist theory is unable to arrive at a uniform notion of the spectacle; it can only apprise the various "moments" of the spectacle without demonstrating any real relation between them. In its insistence that the spectacle at one and the same time corresponds to a particular stage of advanced capitalist development and to more "primitive" societies, and that the fundamental character of modern societies as a whole is spectacular, situationist theory is thrown into contradiction with itself. Precisely because it does not provide a theory of international capitalist development, situationist theory ends up, like the spectacle whose movement it inadequately describes, by imposing a model of social organization upon the world. The "unity" of the spectacle is one which is forced by theory itself. In situationist analysis, it is not that international social reality is demonstrated to be spectacular as a result of its intrinsic processes, but that this reality is spectacularized by virtue of theoretical designation. The facile distinction between "concentrated" and "diffuse" spectacle, for example, makes the spectacle appear as if it were an archetypal form with various differing reflections. Situationist theory equates bureaucratic and advanced capitalist states and does so by means of a critique which ignores the real differences between these types (differences which cannot be reduced to the difference between "concentrated" and "diffuse" power) and which fails to elaborate a complex explanation of their real basis of identity — the productive and authority relations common to both. The S.I.'s analysis merely discovers that commodity relations prevail in both advanced and bureaucratic capitalism and then proclaims their absolute congruence; it considers them to be identically spectacular in their form, and thereby in fact trivializes the entire concept of spectacular society. When societies are characterized as spectacular merely because

they are organized hierarchically and are sustained by affirmative social ideology, the theory of the spectacle loses all precision, and ultimately, all theoretical significance. The imprecision of situationist theory regarding the spectacle is less a confusion about bureaucracy than a distortion of actual historical development itself. The critique of the spectacle does not simply project its categories onto the whole of existing history, but is retroactive as well, extending spectacular domination into the past. In *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord views capitalist society as being spectacular *ante diem*: in this work, we are not only told that "all separate power has been spectacular," we also learn that modern capitalist society represents the "material reconstruction of the religious illusion." Here, spectacular relations achieve a supra-historical existence: not only are all previous hierarchical divisions termed "spectacular," the modern spectacle itself appears as the embodiment of all past alienations. As Debord says, "here, the most modern is also the most archaic." The spectacle appears as both the final truth of capitalist society and as the final truth of alienation; it is the "preservation of unconsciousness within the practical change of the conditions of existence," an unconsciousness which predates both the spectacle and capitalism.

It is as a theory of advanced capitalism that the theory of the spectacle stands or falls, and once this is understood, the inconsistencies of the situationist argument no longer appear only as the consequences of its treatment of subjects outside of advanced capitalist society. The theory of the S.I. emerged during a period of relative abundance in Western societies and developed precisely as a critique of what it understood to be an "overdeveloped commodity economy." The initial theses of the S.I. concerning the post-war period of capitalist development were centered around the concept of the "cybernetic welfare state," which postulated that this period involved the increasing rationalization of social processes, a progressive modernization of social administration which would result in the stabilization of the capitalist order. If the designation of the modern capitalist state as "cybernetic" implied the ascendancy of a technocratic directorate, the description of it as a welfare state connoted a continuous program of social reform: with the elimination of the "irrational" features of its past (e.g., material and intellectual privation and overtly repressive authority), capitalism would realize an anti-Utopia based on economic prosperity. By taking what were then only provisional conditions of capitalist development to be in fact permanent tendencies, the situationists converted what was at best a working hypothesis into "theoretical" doctrine, into a perspective which appeared as absolutely conclusive. The situationists' dogmatic conception of a reformist capitalism — which saw various distinct tendencies only as one uninterrupted movement of social change — was also translated into an equally dogmatic formulation of the possible basis for a radical transformation of this capitalism. A necessary derivative of the situationist critique of developed bourgeois society was the

proposition that capitalism had resolved certain antagonisms inherent in its previous history. Thus, contradictions between competing factions of the ruling elite, between capitalism and syndicalism, between reformist movements and the bourgeois state, either no longer existed or no longer posed a direct threat to prevailing social authority. As a result of this neutralization of intra-capitalist conflict, social contradiction was displaced onto a qualitative level; for the situationists, the essential division in modern society was between those who had "lost all control over the use of their lives" and the system which maintained power against this "proletariat." This division took precedence over all the immediate issues of social dispute, and opposition, even as it emerged from within the processes of spectacular society, would thus come from outside the plane of "spectacular" conflict. Situationist theory asserted that the institutions of capitalism would collapse as a result of a proletarian assault against modern social hierarchy and the alienation which this power organized. Furthermore, it implicitly maintained that capitalism would enter into crisis not as a result of its inherent economic contradictions, but as a result of a permanent social crisis engendered by its qualitative contradictions. Today, when the accelerating crisis of advanced capitalism is described even by the bourgeois press as a "mini-depression," the converse would be more accurate: the breakdown of the economic mechanisms of advanced capitalism opens up the possibility of a generalized social crisis. But even disregarding this circumstance, which could not possibly have been anticipated by any theory developed in the mid-1960's, situationist analysis is deficient in one crucial aspect: it does not undertake an examination of what exactly conditions proletarian practice, of the precise determinants of modern class struggle. This deficiency is compounded by an identical failure to comprehend the material basis of "spectacular" development.

Even though the theory of spectacular society is explicitly a critique of political economy, it is precisely this critique which is the most underdeveloped aspect of situationist theory: the *political economy* of the spectacle is never elaborated. While the situationists certainly recognized that material abundance was not incidental to the development of spectacular society, but was in fact at its core, all references to this basis were made *en passant*; the spectacle only appears at the "moment of economic abundance," but this movement is not recognized for what it really is, a specific stage of capitalist development, and one which is not irreversible, at least in the sense of a majority of the population enjoying the benefits of abundance. And if situationist theory is at a loss to explain the internal development of advanced capitalism, it is no more able to explain its external expansion. There is no theory in situationist analysis superior to, or even analogous to, conventional explanations of "imperialism"; the accumulation of capital on an international level and the differentiation of capitalist societies are reduced to a matter of a "division of spectacular tasks." Although Debord, in *Society of the Spectacle*, speaks of the

“unique movement which has made the planet its field,” this hardly analytical statement is a mere digression in his central argument and is never elaborated upon. The primitivism of situationist theory in regard to economics reaches its ridiculous height in *61 Theses...*, in which the authors assert that capitalism “has not shown itself incapable of pursuing (economic) development quantitatively, but rather, qualitatively.” This statement is not only remarkable in that it reveals the situationists’ misinterpretation of the level of material progress attained by advanced capitalism; it is also indicative of a misapprehension of the term “qualitative.” The strict equation of this term with “quality” in the sense of excellence or superiority is an error which is found throughout situationist writings. Despite what the S.I. says in this respect, capitalism is quite capable of entering into a qualitative crisis of its structures or of encountering a qualitative barrier to capitalist accumulation, which can be understood without any reference to its ability to improve the quality of human life. Similarly, Debord’s repeated use of the concept of “division of labor” without any qualifying adjective reflects a lack of theoretical sophistication; unlike the Marx of *Das Kapital*, he speaks in ahistorical terms of *the* division of labor rather than a specific (i.e., capitalist) division of labor, and consequently alludes to the necessity of overcoming *the*, rather than *a*, division of labor. But whatever these minor, if significant errors, the most important consequence of situationist theory’s neglect of productive forces and their development is to be found in a distinct theoretical bias towards social spheres outside of production; in many respects, the theory of the spectacle is a theory of *consumption*, of the concretized result of production, but not a theory, strictly speaking, of production itself. It is almost exclusively concerned with the realm of social appearances and with the *image* of modern production, where production finally affects social life, and not with the actual functioning of the advanced capitalist economy. The implicit separation which results from this preoccupation leads to an exaggeration of the role played by consumption in determining the essential features of advanced capitalist society. Here, the theory of the spectacle approaches the sociological analysis of the “consumer society,” and in fact a neo-situationist sociology has already appeared, one which is less a distortion of situationist theses than their logical extension, in Baudrillard’s theory of the “society of consumption.” (4)

The essential failure of situationist criticism as social theory is its failure to establish the structural dynamics of spectacular society, to produce an account of the developmental process of advanced capitalism. Situationist theory can only summarize structural evolution within the spectacle with the remark that here, “the goal is nothing, development is all.” As a result of this inability to formulate a comprehensive theory of social movement, the concept of spectacle appears as an undifferentiated *Gestalt*, a pure form or structure superimposed over social activity. While situationist theory recognizes that the spectacle is based on continuous transformation, that it in fact forms a dynamic unity,

this transformation is never really confronted, and the real levels of spectacular dynamism are not explored. Although the spectacle is perceived as a body in motion, it is in the last instance treated by situationist theory as a body at rest. The theory of the spectacle can merely state that "what the spectacle gives as eternal is founded on change, and must change with its base"; even as the spectacle is "founded on change," it remains an essentially unchanging *entity*. Without a theory of its articulation, the spectacle becomes — in theory — simply a general framework within which reality "rises up," and if this rising up is only abstractly perceived, so also is the structure in which it unfolds. Situationist theory does confront the existence of antagonisms within the continuous surface of the spectacle, recognizing that the reality circumscribed by spectacular domination is divided into distinct spheres, but even as it takes up the problems posed by "unity and division within appearance," it cannot adequately conceptualize the real foundation of either "unity" or "division" within modern society. An initial barrier to such a conceptualization is the reductionist approach of the theory of the spectacle, which consolidates all the component features of the spectacular superstructure under the rubric of "representation." The most glaring example of this theoretical simplification of the form of advanced capitalist society is the situationists' almost complete neglect of the "politico-juridical" sphere of the spectacle: the political dimension of modern capitalist power is simply subsumed within the all-embracing jurisdiction of "spectacular culture." Additionally, situationist theory contains two contradictory notions of spectacular authority: the S.I., proceeding from quite different assumptions, shared with conventional leftism a view of modern capitalism as creating a monolithic, authoritarian society, and at the same time saw this society as existing in a permanent state of self-division and reform. Since both of these descriptions of advanced capitalism remain on the level of the superficial and do not enter into a discussion of the real conditions of spectacular cohesion and modification, they are no more than empty generalizations: the conception of the spectacle as being based on permanent division (as generating an endless series of "false" antagonisms) is merely the other side of the conception of the spectacle as a monolithic structure. Here, the much-vaunted "dialectics" of the S.I. are found wanting: in both cases, no real grasp of the social antagonisms and the structural crises of modern capitalism is possible. Without an elaboration of its historical parameters, the fluidity of spectacular development remains a mere theoretical "given."

Considered as a conceptual whole, the theory of the spectacle, like the object of its criticism, presents itself as an "enormous, inaccessible" construction. If the spectacle has an "essentially tautological" character, so also does its theory: the analysis in *Society of the Spectacle* consists largely of a series of definitions, each of which is interchangeable with another. The spectacle is alternately defined as the "result and project of the existing mode of production" and as the "uninterrupted conversation which the

present order maintains about itself"; despite all these refinements of the term "spectacle," a real concept of the spectacle eludes Debord. The theory of the spectacle is basically circumlocutory, establishing a conceptual perimeter around the spectacle, but never penetrating its interior. The essential nature of its object is never apprehended by situationist analysis. To a certain extent, the notion of the spectacle resembles the Kantian category of "thing in itself," in that the spectacle can never really be known. Although the spectacle manifests itself in social phenomena, the real causes of the spectacle remain obscure; it acquires a certain ineffability even as it exerts its domination over everything. The omnipotent and omnipresent character which the spectacle assumes in situationist theory is an indication of the theory's shortcomings: the spectacle is understood and shown only as a simple presence devoid of any real substance. In a sense, the theory of the spectacle is only a theory of presence and as such becomes spectacularized itself. Situationist thought eventually succumbs to the very spectacle whose "reality" it seeks to reveal, simply because this disclosure is entrapped within the contradictions of its own concepts. Even the appearance of a theory of the spectacle is inexplicable within the context of the situationist argument, which maintains both that in the spectacle, "every individual becomes unable to recognize reality," and that theory is precisely a recognition and signification of that reality. In order to preserve an idea of the total permeation of "social reality" by the spectacle, situationist theory must situate its critical vantage point outside of the spectacle, which is to say, outside of history.

It is somewhat ironic that despite the S.I.'s summary dismissal of structuralism as the "thought guaranteed by the State," situationist theory bears a distinct resemblance — in its conceptual deficiencies — to this tendency of modern criticism. Its supposedly historical character notwithstanding, the critique of the spectacle has a certain methodological affinity with the structuralist analysis of capitalism. Specifically, the theory of the spectacle as elaborated by Debord is vitiated by many of the same contradictions as Althusser's theory of the "exposition" of capitalist structures; like Althusser's interpretation of the *Darstellung* in capitalist society, (5) the concept of the spectacle interprets the sphere of "presentation" of modern society as being the location of both objective truth and social dissimulation, as embodying both true and false appearances. As with Althusserian criticism, situationist theory seeks to join the categories of the "real" and "unreal" and have them finally appear as one category — in the case of the S.I., that of the spectacle. This joining of the real and the unreal does not simply mean that the spectacle — like the labor process as described in Marx's *Grundrisse* — represents at one and the same time the realization of existing social relations and the de-realization of existing humanity; rather, it involves a more far-reaching assertion, one which contains a serious conceptual dilemma, where Debord posits the spectacle as both a real and a false category. Thus, even while Debord can state that the spectacle is real, that "it is in fact produced," he can also say that the

"cumulative power of independent artificiality is followed everywhere by the falsification of social life." Here, it must be emphasized that he is not talking about a distorted representation of social life, but the actual distortion of that life itself. Debord's statement is open to the obvious criticism that it implies the existence of a "real" or "true" social life at some point in the past, but even more importantly, its methodological assumptions can also be challenged. By uniting both the moment of the "exposition" and distortion of social reality within a single plane of spectacular appearances, Debord departs from the critical approach of Marx, who consistently distinguishes between social organization and organized social appearances, even as he establishes that what is distinguished forms a "higher unity," a total process of social mediation. Thus, in *Capital*, commodity fetishism appears as an aspect of commodity relations and even as the outward form of commodity circulation, but it does not form an aspect of the commodity *per se* or of the economic processes of commodity production. The commodity is the primary form of mediation in bourgeois society, but the ideological mediation of the commodity is a process which is carried out independently of the commodity itself. By failing to preserve the distinction between the outer form ("appearance") and the inner reality ("essence") of capitalist society, the theory of the spectacle loses any real conceptual base.

Although situationist theory attempts to transcend empirical analysis — and the spectacle is most certainly not empirically verifiable — it does not succeed in constituting the spectacle as a valid theoretical construction. It lacks an internal coherence. In endowing the spectacle with an intangible significance such that it only appears as a generalized (social) illusion, the situationist critique invalidates the very reality of the spectacle, whose existence, given the contradictions of situationist theory, cannot be confirmed. In order to sustain its indictment of capitalist domination, situationist theory must resurrect a kind of pre-Marxian anthropology, in which natural human essence is contrasted to its distorted form in contemporary society. The situationist discussion of class divisions does not preclude such an anthropological tendency: in Debord, spectacular society appears as the "true reflection of the producer of things, and the false objectification of the producers," as if the producers in the capitalist economy *qua* producers could find anything but their true objectification in their activity. Spectacular authority is considered as a "denial" of Man, and with these descriptions, the situationist critique unconsciously becomes a moralistic denunciation of capitalist inhumanity. Borrowing from other sources, Debord evokes a melodramatic imagery to depict the global spectacle as, in its appearance, the "image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and horror, in the tranquil center of unhappiness." Such a portrayal of the spectacle in terms of an absolute contrast where the spectacle's "unhappiness" is opposed to human satisfaction leaves the situationists unable to explain how the spectacle can present itself as the already-achieved realization of human desires, as a power

based in fact on sensory gratification. Spectacular experience is not perceived as compensatory experience, as an incorporation of individual fantasy into the basic structures of capitalist life. The S.I. is unable to see that the spectacle institutes its own, albeit reified, "pleasure principle" everywhere. And conversely, the real nature of spectacular repression escapes the S.I.: what can be understood in precise terms of compulsion and restriction, of the specific constraints imposed on individual and collective behavior by contemporary capitalism, is reduced to the abstract dimensions of a "negation of life."

The forced separation in situationist criticism of "humanity" from the spectacle and the subsequent elevation of this dichotomy to the level of pure contradiction has a further consequence in the subjectivization of material categories in situationist theory. Debord's view of the movement of the spectacle as the "autonomous movement of the non-living" leads to an inverted Hegelianism in which material reality becomes a force developing independently of human activity. This spiritualization of matter is ultimately its dematerialization: the spectacle manifests itself as *Weltgeist*, as a power diffused throughout social life and establishing itself for itself above that life. The spectacle, thus, must be perceived at its origin as a *primum mobile*, as the unmoved mover which instigates the motion of contemporary history. Adam Smith's "invisible hand" reappears in Debord as the spectacular authority which regulates all spheres of modern existence. This theory, like the world it attempts to describe, is a theory which is "really on its head"; here, things assume an active voice, and both commodities and society are *personified*, brought to life by theory. What was only an occasional rhetorical device in Marx's writings — after all, in *Capital*, the words are "if commodities could talk," not that they somehow do — is accorded the status of a fundamental critical principle. In the end, the spectacle appears as a supernatural realm, where the "commodity contemplates itself in a world which it has created." The theory of the spectacle is a theory which fails to defetishize its object and is purely an account of mystified and mystifying appearances which never gets beyond the form to the underlying content. This is not to state that a theory of the *Darstellungsform* in advanced capitalism is not required, but simply that the situationist concept of the spectacle is no longer sufficient.

The theoretical shortcomings of the S.I. must finally be explained in terms of an inability to fulfill critical ambitions. The incompleteness of situationist analysis is evident not only in its failure to produce a sufficient explanation of existing historical conditions, but in its failure to fully apprehend the polarities of theoretical mediation itself, to appreciate the distinct levels on which critical explanation develops. On a still simplistic level, radical social theory unfolds within a dialectic comprising both the sphere of the "particular" (the concrete level at which social existence appears and finally constitutes itself) and that of the "universal" (the general historical contours in which social organization evolves). Within this context, theory emerges as a form

of conscious mediation between the concrete and the general; it interposes itself as a conceptual unity of these two spheres. To borrow again from Hegelian terminology, theory must develop on the level of the "concrete universal," that is, on the level of being and becoming. For social theory, this is the level of historical movement; it must relate the movement of its own concepts to that of history. Although it was able to arrive at an intuition of the essential "moments" of social realization, situationist theory was unable to provide an ultimate conceptual unity in its critique of modern capitalism. In order to establish the truth of the spectacle, spectacular immediacy must first be transcended: the immediate forms in which the spectacle appears not only preserve various pretenses (e.g., the strict demarcation between the "political" realm and the "neutral" sphere of daily life), they also, precisely through the "superficial" antagonisms of politics, economy, and culture, conceal the real content of the spectacle as, in the S.I.'s view, the absolute alienation of human desires and capacities. But in this transcendence, the S.I. did not accomplish a radical sublation of spectacular immediacy: it simply negated the specific sphere of capitalist development without preserving it as an essential aspect of the general sphere of this development, as a formative plane of the realization process of the spectacle. Particular developments within the spectacular totality were seen as simple reflections of universal structures and relationships. For the S.I., the particular only confirmed the universal.

The result of the S.I.'s establishing a direct, unilateral connection between these aspects was both an abstract immediacy and an abstract universality to the situationist critique: the S.I.'s theory sought to be both relevant to all particular situations in capitalist society and universally valid as a description of that social form. As with any such ultimately contradictory task, neither status was attained: the S.I. did not achieve relevancy, nor did it achieve universality. Its dismissal of the so-called "secondary" contradictions of spectacular society, i.e., economic and political disputes, meant that it was unable to perceive the real arena of conflict and reform in advanced capitalism. By failing to link its theory directly to historical development, the S.I. "left mediation outside itself": the theoretical axes of the S.I. did not correspond to the developmental axes of modern social history. This lack of correspondence did not mean that the S.I. failed to discern the main tendencies of social transformation, but rather, their exact location. Ultimately, the concrete escaped the S.I., which was unable to establish the actual qualitative context — the precise socio-economic determinants — of contemporary practice. To understand the importance of this specific determination of activity is not to say, with Hegel, that the concrete simply "differentiates itself," but to recognize that the concrete is differentiated by social activity and is differentiating of that activity. Despite the S.I.'s active concern with the "root structures of reification," the particular historical manifestations of these structures remained *terra incognita* for situationist theory.

The absence in situationist theory of a genuine synthesis of specific and general categories, and the resulting disjunction between these categories within situationist theory, have further consequences: the fundamental incoherence of situationist criticism embraces an implicitly dualistic perspective, where each concept established by theory calls forth its (absolute) opposite. The world of the spectacle, like its description, the world of situationist theory, is a divided reality — divided not against itself but against its other. The spectacle is the realm of the “quantitative,” of “ideology,” of “false consciousness”; the anti-spectacle is the abode of the “qualitative,” of “theory,” of “radical consciousness.” Underlying the dichotomous world-view of the S.I. is an attempt to make reality conform to theory, to separate capitalist society completely from its negation. Because any connection between these opposites is lost, the S.I. fails to explain how they really are distinguished from each other, except on an arbitrary basis: all pretensions to the contrary, situationist theory does not contain a substantive theory of the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society. It can ultimately only show, by means of a facile contrast, that which is not *hierarchical*, that which is not alienated, and the realization process of the revolutionary class is only discussed in a cursory fashion. The original rupture within the situationist perspective, however, must be located in its uncritical acceptance of a rigid division between “subject” and “representation” within social reality. This superficially Hegelian Marxism conceives of everything that is not appropriated by the conscious human subject as mere alien externality, as absolute otherness: it traces the downfall of the social world from this original loss of unity and seeks as a goal its restoration. And in order to understand the particular “search” undertaken by situationist theory, it is necessary to examine what it takes as its sources, to look at where it draws its critical inspiration.

In appropriating the supposedly radical content of past theoretical and practical traditions, the S.I. also inherited their unresolved contradictions and ambiguities, and it accomplished less a contemporary mediation of these historical examples than their pure and simple retrieval, preserving their most “relevant” aspects without assimilating them within the context of modern criticism. The S.I.’s interpretation of previous theory was not historical: rather, intellectual “history” is seen in terms of a contrived sequence of points of innovation (Hegel-Marx-Lukács-Pannekoek) which are only formally related to each other. And this pseudo-history has an effect on both the theoretical style and content of the situationist perspective: Debord’s extensive and direct use of other sources in *Society of the Spectacle* has a determining influence on the course of his analysis. Of these antecedents, the S.I.’s relationship to Marx is particularly crucial; its “confrontation” with him remains more a simple intention than an accomplished fact. Only those writings of Marx that were most easily applicable to contemporary society — e.g., the theme of alienation in the 1844 *Paris Manuscripts* — were extensively cited by the S.I. In fact, Marx’s theory is never critically assessed as a whole in situationist writings:

the corpus of the mature Marx is tacitly accepted as an intact body of thought, as if nothing in it required a thorough examination or revision. Marx's critique of political economy remains an almost forbidden province of inquiry, whose concepts ("commodity fetishism," for example) can be invoked but never seriously evaluated within the context of Marx's own theoretical argument. Issues such as the labor theory of value or Marx's general theory of capitalist economic crisis are left for others — usually those disparagingly referred to as "Marxists" — to take up. And beyond the situationists' almost capricious use of Marx is a failure to analyze subsequent developments in political economy and philosophy, with the singular exception of Lukacs. These omissions are not accidental; rather, what the S.I. chose not to discuss was as revealing as that with which it concerned itself. The silence of the S.I. on certain subjects was a *de facto* admission of the limits of its own inquiry; despite its concern with a "total critique," situationist criticism engaged in the very kind of specialization it decried, concentrating its attention on a "qualitative" critique of the culture of alienation in modern capitalism. Even as it took up the questions of bureaucratic power and urbanism, it ceded the field of criticism in certain crucial areas to other specialists; in the sphere of modern economics, the S.I. had almost nothing to say, preferring to leave to the ideologists the task of "completing" the S.I.'s theoretical program.

The situationists share with Marx a curious reluctance to discuss their precise social origins and to openly consider the relationship of essentially intellectual theorists to the movement of the proletariat. And unlike Marx, this distance between theory and its proletarian practitioners is reproduced internally in situationist theory, whose conception of the proletariat is decidedly imprecise. Following the direct precedent of Lukács, who stood in a similar relation to the "class of consciousness," the situationists arrive at a theoretical mythologization of the proletariat, which becomes more important as a conceptual than a social category. In Lukács, the proletariat is conceived almost as a philosophical construction, as a *deus ex machina socia* which resolves all contradictions of bourgeois thought and culture. In *History and Class Consciousness*, the proletariat appears as the savior of modern civilization, invested with the power of redeeming all the defects of bourgeois culture. In the case of the S.I., it arrives in order to realize modern art. With both Lukacs and the S.I., the proletariat is subjectivized by theory, and this can be seen not only in the description of the proletariat as a singular, as opposed to plural, entity, but in the characterization of this "historical subject" as a force which appears as having attained a "unity," without, however, having objectively confirmed this fact. In situationist theory, the modern proletariat is never fully analyzed as an objective phenomenon. It does not appear as a class whose composition is to be investigated; rather, situationist criticism begins with a notion of the "proletariat" and applies it to reality. Thus, the S.I. can flatly assert that the "proletariat cannot be judged by what it is, but by what it does," as if what the proletariat is has no

effect upon what it does. The situationist theory of the proletariat becomes hypostatized and is taken to be real without any substantive empirical confirmation of its validity. Breaking with the Kautskyist-Leninist tradition, the situationists impute consciousness to, rather than impose it upon the proletariat. Its desire to identify itself with the most radical actions of the modern proletariat led the S.I. to confer an *ex post facto* situationist quality upon all the "revolts" of this class. With this ascription of consciousness, the looter of Watts is joined with the student rioter of Paris and the rebellious worker of Poland, and they are joined not on the basis of the real content of their actions, but on the basis of a content provided by theory: since they are all "fighting their alienation," they are all supposed to be part of the same proletariat.

In spite of its modernism, the S.I. retained a latent apocalyptic vision of revolutionary transformation, idealizing radical change as an ultimate break with history even as this change created the conditions where "real history" could begin. In the situationist conception of revolution, transformation becomes transmutation; the present is obliterated by a demiurgical act of collective will. Following tradition, the S.I. is appropriately vague about the probable features (and possible contradictions) of the new revolutionary order; it takes Marx's supposed strictures against the formulation of any blueprint of a revolutionary society as absolving it from the task of elaborating a comprehensive theory of the revolutionary process. Even where the S.I. does attempt to consider the new world in its "bare generality," as in Vaneigem's *Avis aux civilisés . . .*, it can only produce a series of Fourierist platitudes about the inauguration of the realm of pleasure through the power of the workers' councils. And if the S.I. is fashionably imprecise in its discussion of the implications of revolutionary social organization, it maintains a similar insouciance in regards to the determining origins of a generalized radical practice. The S.I. thus minimizes the specific causal factors of the May revolt; the initiatory causes of the uprising become essentially unimportant in relation to its "world-historical" significance. With this indifference to causality, it is unable to account for the failure of similar revolts to occur in the post-May period. As a result of this superficial explanation of radical social activity, revolution appears in situationist theory as a categorical imperative which impels the proletariat to an autonomous historical practice for itself. Moreover, the S.I. is prepared to provide the theoretical content of this goal of contemporary history; it is willing to define the objectives of proletarian practice, and it defines them in terms of situationist concepts, namely, that of generalized self-management.

Autogestion emerges as an *idée fixe* within situationist thought: not only is it proposed as the necessary form of modern revolutionary struggle, it is presented as both the immediate and absolute aim of this movement. Self-management appears as the *ultima ratio* against capitalist power, both as the means to shatter spectacular reification and as the organizing principle of communist society; as a situationist put it, "with the lever of the councils and the fulcrum of a

total negation of the spectacular commodity society, the World can be moved." Despite the situationists' preoccupation with the "uninterrupted transformation of everyday life" and the necessity of "total revolution," self-management assumes the property of an end in itself, an initial and final embodiment of the revolutionary project. The situationist revival of a councilist tradition was not, obviously, an attempt to recover the actual historical experience of that tradition, but to recover an historical form, that of the workers' councils, for application in contemporary practice. Whatever its essentially radical character (as an intervention against the monopoly of social form by capitalist-bureaucratic power), this recovery was identically a fetishization of a form of revolutionary practice (the council) and of the location of this practice (the capitalist economy). With its fixation on the proletarian assumption of economic power, situationist theory reproduced economism on a "qualitative" level. Its orientation towards the productive sphere as the location of revolutionary transformation caused it to minimize the extra-economic dimensions of the revolutionary process (culture, "politics," socialization), and this relatively narrow view of councilist power was not only reflected in its underestimation of the difficulties of councilist organization within the context of a revolutionary social administration exercising hegemony over the whole of society, but in its neglect of the importance of issues arising outside the immediate sphere of alienated labor in determining the direction of a revolutionary movement. "Generalized self-management," moreover, proved to be the most easily recuperable of all the situationist slogans, and this recuperation did not simply occur as a result of the appropriation of the term "self-management" by all sorts of existing authorities ranging from the CFDT to the Peruvian and Portuguese military juntas, but through the actual integration of elements of an *autogestionnaire* program into an international process of capitalist reform. The democratization of the capitalist work process, the breakdown of intensive specialization within the factory, and the introduction of various "workers' participation" schemes, were not simply indications that capitalism had become "frantically reformist"; capitalist reformism had in fact undercut the real basis of the situationist position. Self-management as a form no longer appeared radical, but reformist. Although the S.I. was most certainly not talking about the democratic management of capitalism, but of the revolutionary supersession of capitalist society, the central importance of self-management to the situationist perspective ultimately becomes a liability.*

* The degeneration of the theory of self-management into an ideology did not occur merely outside the situationist movement; in Raoul Vaneigem's pseudonymous work *De la grève sauvage à l'autogestion généralisée*, situationist theory "meets the workers," but it does so in an explicitly ideological form. Having once given "advice" to the revolutionary movement, Vaneigem has now become its counselor (*Ratgeber*). The book is nothing more than a rhetorical summation (and an unintentional self-parody) of situationist theses, in which self-management appears as the elixir of the new amorous world: "Generalized self-management assures each individual an immediate rise in the quality of daily life (the primacy of disalienated passions, abolition of forced work, construction of genuine human relationships)."

The convergence between situationist theses and advanced capitalist ideology is not limited to the issue of self-management, however. Most of the positive concepts of the situationist revolt ("quality of life," "pleasure," uninhibited "communication") directly anticipate themes in contemporary culture, and in view of this, Vaneigem's proposal (in the 1970 orientation debate) "to call all of modern ideology situationism" does not seem at all preposterous today. But to attribute the S.I.'s prefigurement of social ideology to the "implicit situationism" of advanced capitalist development is to misrepresent the source of the contamination of situationist theory: it is the implicit reflection in situationist theory of the reformist principles of advanced capitalism, and not the reverse phenomenon, which must be confronted. In particular, the situationist emphasis on the need for "authenticity" in experience mirrors the false sensuality of late capitalist culture. Precisely on account of the abstract manner of its formulation, this leitmotif of situationist theory is easily assimilable within — and itself assimilates — the immediate forms of "lived experience" in dominant culture. To the extent that the general positive program of the S.I. was formulated on an abstract level — i.e., without any immediate relation to specific struggles and issues — its neutralization by modernist ideology was a foregone conclusion; once stripped of its class perspective, this set of beliefs was compatible with any other value system. The mere possibility of a generalized situationist life-style — a possibility long since realized in fact — also points up the extent to which the situationist movement, in its defeat, rejoined the general movement of "radical" culture within capitalist society. Indeed, even in spite of its absolute break with all artistic forms and "illusions," the S.I. always remained a cultural movement in the narrow sense of the term: certain stylized, almost ornamental, concepts which emerged out of Lettrism are retained in the "mature" situationist critique: psycho-geography, the theory of the *dérive*, and the entire abstract notion of the "created situation." Even the situationist theory of *détournement* — the S.I.'s much-vaunted "style of subversion" — betrays elements of an aesthetic; it is a mode, rather than content, of expression, one, moreover, which is not entirely successful as a radical form. Occasionally, the subversion of images as practiced by the situationists speaks for others in a literal sense, joining acts to their "consciousness" after the fact and resorting to the same devices as the medium it "scandalizes." If only beautiful women can articulate situationist theory, it is because this theory is itself beautiful, glamorous, and even orgasmic. As one "situationist" pin-up put it, "Aaaahhhh, L'Internationale Situationniste!" More seriously, the situationist movement, like its precursor, surrealism, assumes certain features of a romanticist revival which seeks to attach itself to class struggle. These negative aspects are not restricted simply to the obvious case of Vaneigemism. In its self-caricaturist aspects, the situationist revolt becomes a seigneurial revolt whose aristocratic *mot d'ordre* is "never work" and whose goal is the rule of "masters without slaves."

The situationist critique contained the seeds of its own

destruction as social theory; its definitiveness lay more in its appearance than in its substance. In the light of contemporary analysis, the "coherent perspective" of the S.I. appears more as a related series of critical interventions than as a unified theory of modern history. If the most important critical contribution of the S.I. — the theory of the spectacle — is to retain any validity, it must be reformulated in a rigorous manner, and if, in the future, there is to be a *situationist* theory, it must be established on a new conceptual basis which corresponds to historical movement. The defeat of situationist theory, like the defeat of situationist practice, must be attributed to history, and if the critical insights of the S.I. are to be preserved, they must be used to analyze that history. Merely to disseminate situationist theses in their original form is only another mystification; they are already impoverished as ideas. And all those who have attempted to base themselves, either theoretically or practically, on situationist analysis have not escaped the fate of the S.I.

IV

Of all the premature conclusions drawn by the S.I. about historical tendencies, none was so inopportune as that which it deduced about itself and the "success" of its theory. At precisely the moment when the "judgement of history" was prepared to render a verdict unfavorable to the supposed "victory" of the situationist movement, the S.I. could vaingloriously proclaim with respect to its precocious development that "such an extremist project has never affirmed its hegemony in the struggle of ideas . . . in so short a time." (61 *Theses*) Today, one must add that never has such a theoretical hegemony proved so short-lived, and having attempted to explain the cause of the S.I.'s involuntary demise as a theoretical and practical force, criticism must be directed towards an examination of the actual legacy of the S.I.'s brief "preeminence" within the modern world. In achieving a certain superiority in a particular field of theoretical combat, the S.I. became an intellectual power, in other words, a power existing solely through the power of ideas. The prestige of the S.I. increased in proportion to the external diffusion of its theses, and this dissemination of its theory served to create a situationist constituency that was literally held in sway by situationist ideas. The S.I.'s influence over what it considered to be the "modern revolutionary movement" was unambiguously ideological — it became a *de facto* ideological authority. This quality of the S.I. was to be confirmed in the very nature of its success: the terrain of situationist activity was only enlarged by the mechanical reproduction — in formations outside the S.I. — of the S.I.'s theory and practice, or rather, their image. In the post-May period, the S.I. was acutely aware that it would either succeed as a revolutionary organization or become, in its own words, the "last revolutionary spectacle," and while it was far from being the last such

phenomenon, it certainly did become, both in its superficial notoriety and its substantive impact, a spectacle of opposition to capitalist power. The S.I. became a model organization in the real sense of the term, exerting a paradigmatic influence upon elements of ultra-left opposition within international capitalism. In this milieu, the generalization of the situationist critique consisted primarily in a generalized imitation of the S.I., where supposedly "autonomous" groups enveloped themselves in a mystique of situationist organization, a glamorous image enhanced by the S.I. itself. Although the S.I. renounced its property rights to its theory and magnanimously declared that "situationist theory does not belong to the S.I. alone," no significant theoretical or practical development of a situationist nature did in fact occur outside the S.I.

In advanced capitalist states, the S.I. had expected to encounter the most modern revolutionary opposition, one which for that very reason would have been most receptive to situationist ideas. According to this view, the United States, as the most advanced capitalist power, should have provided a decisive opportunity for new advances in situationist agitation, even though it was precisely in the U.S. where the neutralization and absorption of radical opposition within dominant culture had progressed the furthest. But if the conditions which allowed a situationist tendency to appear in America were themselves an expression of the fundamental crisis of social authority in American capitalism, this movement emerged less as a unique and indigenous formation than as an imported derivative of the S.I. And this was not merely a phenomenon limited to America: virtually everywhere, even in France, the penetration of situationist ideas followed a line of least resistance, which had predictable results. Situationist ideas were not so much appropriated by autonomous tendencies as they were idealized by those who sought to emulate the radical "perfection" of the S.I., and who, on this basis, constituted themselves as an "autonomous" movement. The history of the American situationist movement is the history of a facsimile: its tortuous progress corresponds to the haphazard journey of its followers in pursuit of a coherent myth - the *beau idéal* of the S.I. The specific development of the American situationist movement must, however, be explained in terms of factors peculiar to American society. In America, as elsewhere, the situationist critique appealed to the same social stratum as that within which the S.I. had itself arisen in France: situationist theory in the U.S. became principally the theory of the American New Left and counter-culture. And it was a disaffection with the inadequacies of this revolt and its betrayal by an increasingly Stalinist New Left as much as with capitalist society which led certain of the most radical oppositional elements to adopt a situationist perspective; the theory of the S.I. promised to fill the theoretical vacuum of the extreme left in America and to provide a comprehensive program in opposition to "sacrificial militancy."

The French revolt of May 1968 provided the historical basis for the introduction of situationist theses into radical circles throughout the U.S. May '68 loomed as a revolutionary apparition on the

horizon of American activism, and for a short time, all tendencies of opposition vicariously identified themselves with the events in France. Paris in revolt became the New Jerusalem of the American left: here, in a developed country, workers and students were uniting as a revolutionary force. And it was as an aspect of the "glorious tradition" of May that the existence of the Situationist International first became known in the U.S. Situationist theory, having apparently served as a direct inspiration for the French revolutionaries, became the direct inspiration for those who sought to explain the "lessons of May" to an American audience. If May '68 became a paragon of modern revolutionary practice, situationist theory became the explanation *par excellence* of modern capitalist society, representing the hitherto unknown theory of the American "spectacle." The situationist critique arrived in the U.S. relatively intact, but in isolation from the intellectual context of its analytical development — the competing theories against and through which situationist theory had evolved. Not surprisingly, situationist theory encountered little resistance in anarchist and libertarian circles, where it overwhelmed all opposition simply because no real alternative to it then existed, outside of a few obscure ultra-left theoretical tendencies that above all lacked the notoriety and compelling style of the S.I. The radical empiricist and sociological traditions prevalent in the American left were no match for situationist criticism, and the absence in America of a Marxist cultural tradition equivalent to that of Europe meant that there essentially were no critical standards — outside those of a few Marxist academics — by which to evaluate the situationist perspective. In America, the sources of situationist analysis and that analysis itself were encountered in reverse order: the critical antecedents of the S.I. were confronted *ex post facto*, after having been mediated by the S.I. Thus, in the American situationist movement, Marx largely became known only through the expropriation of the "essence" of his work by the S.I. and was initially approached from a situationist perspective. Situationist criticism thus came to enjoy by default a theoretical supremacy over a certain faction of the left, without any serious debate as to the real content of the positions of the S.I. It is also paradoxical that situationist theory could be considered here as the "avant-garde" of critical thought, even though its theoretical program was completed without addressing the particular structural characteristics of American capitalism. During its formative period in the mid-Sixties, the S.I. necessarily only accorded cursory treatment (in *Decline and Fall . . .* and *On the Poverty of Student Life*) to the radicalization process from which the American New Left, and eventually, the adherents to the situationist perspective, had emerged. The insufficiencies and the obsolete character of many situationist positions did not prevent the American followers of the S.I. from taking its perspective to be directly relevant to the American situation, and the failure of the American situationists to demonstrate any real theoretical autonomy can be attributed at its origins to their uncritical adoption of situationist theory as a

definitive explanation of the social forms of American capitalism.

A situationist presence in the U.S. was multiplied, and situationist theory disseminated, through a hierarchical process of *transmission in which the American section of the S.I. represented a center of radiating influence upon certain radical milieux, which would later constitute the American "situationist movement."* Under the unofficial auspices of the American S.I., a direct and indirect line of communication was established between those who became active participants in the situationist movement. At one point, nearly all protagonists were in contact with each other, and within this closed circle, an informal order was established on the basis of the longevity of each particular "organization," the American S.I. (and subsequently, Create Situations), Contradiction, Point-Blank, Negation — all were ranked according to the degrees of their supposed "experience," and in the ensuing war of succession after the collapse of the S.I., each was to assert its claim to the situationist throne on the basis of priority, with respect to who outranked whom in terms of authority and precedence (with the exception of Point-Blank and Negation who, for differing reasons, referred to the failure of their predecessors in order to establish their legitimacy). Even before these factional disputes commenced, communication between each tendency consisted as much of the establishment of a code of recognition between groups as of an exchange of ideas. Each successive group in the American situationist hierarchy imparted to the next not only the "situationist perspective," but a prescribed mode of organizational behavior; this radical decorum, or situationist etiquette, was reflected in the stylized comportment of groups towards each other, complete with unwritten rules of conduct governing inter-organizational "breaks" and the maintenance of a situationist "public image." Given the importance of a formal "revolutionary" demeanor to the situationist movement as a whole, it is not at all surprising that breaks between American groups almost always originated in procedural questions or subjective differences, in points of contention which would only later acquire a theoretical significance. Such apparently superficial matters are not simply peripheral to the history of the situationist movement in America; rather, they express the very nature of its development. The fanatical drive of almost any grouping for absolute mastery within the situationist camp was not merely a reflection of a collective "authoritarian personality" within a putatively "anti-hierarchical" movement; it can only be explained as a necessary consequence of the movement's apprehension of situationist theory as absolute truth, as an exclusive theory, which, however "serviceable" to the proletariat as a whole, demanded an exclusive proprietorship in contemporary criticism. It is not, as Ken Knabb would have it, the existence of "pro-situs" resulting from a "limited theoretical monopoly" which is important — as if the non-exclusivity of situationist ideas could somehow prevent their distortion — it is the existence of an essentially (and not incidentally or temporarily) monopolistic situationist movement which must be considered.

This monopolistic power involved both a concentration of theoretical authority in a few individuals and a constriction of critical thought under the domination of situationist perspectives. In viewing situationist theory as a uniform, completed structure, the American situationists could only embellish a pre-existing body of thought: any creative initiative was dependent on the S.I., and the apparent "coherence" of the S.I. engendered a critical paresis among its American followers. In the supposedly free atmosphere of situationist debate, a curious conformism manifested itself, not simply in regards to questions of protocol, but in a surprising unanimity as to what organizational practice constituted. Each group aspired to the *summum bonum* of revolutionary activity — being "like the S.I." The subconscious inferiority complex of the American situationist movement marked its inability to develop critical perspectives.

Within the evolution of the American situationist movement, it is possible to distinguish two general trends of "critical" development: one tendency, of an almost exclusively practical orientation, being concerned with the popularization of situationist ideas; another, of a more theoretical inclination, being involved with a particularization of situationist analysis to the specific context of American capitalism. Both found an ulterior unity in their desire to "utilize" situationist thought within a contemporary context. The subjectivist tendency which emerged from a crude assimilation of Vaneigem's *Treatise* and a vulgarization of his project of a "revolution of everyday life" was successful on at least one account: as the most accessible "situationist" position and consequently the one most easily translated into "practice," it proved to be the more popular of the two. Having first come into vogue at least in the U.S. with the Council for Conscious Existence, this latter-day Fourierism found its most flamboyant expression in the doctrine of "communist egoism" promulgated by For Ourselves (a reincarnation of the group Negation); with this travestied Stirnerism, a situationist Messianism supplants an improvement program for daily experience. Here, Nechayev's *Revolutionary Catechism* reappears not as a liturgy of revolutionary self-denial, but as a formulary of romantic self-affirmation. For example, in their "Preamble" to a situationist constitution, they enumerate the Rights of (Subjective) Man: "radical subjectivity," "pleasure," "self-authority" — all of which are founded on the primordial "right to be greedy." With For Ourselves, "theory" is simply a means for them to further their proselytizing activity and to convert the "unconscious masses" to the path of what is altruistically termed "self-theory." It is thus not surprising that they reduce the whole of a radical perspective to a simplistic doctrine in which critical elements become articles of faith. The revolutionary process is summarized as follows: "People seeking, in good conscience and without guilt, more pleasure from their own everyday lives, contains (*sic*) the whole of the revolution." Thus, it is entirely in keeping that they talk of "self-management" as the "management of self."

This subjectivist ideology is itself demanding of a strictly

literal interpretation, but despite its fundamentally mundane nature, it has a significance beyond its immediate concepts; it is indicative of a general mode of perception of situationist theory. But subjectivism is more than strident situationism; it is situationist theory taken at face value, and there are sinister undertones to this *prima facie* interpretation. For Ourselves's exhortation to "give everything you've got, to give your all" (*The Right to be Greedy*) announces the reign of a "subjective" tyranny: their desire to literally unite — to fuse — with others is a demand for an immediate total experience, where any subject-object distinction is obliterated in an undifferentiated totality of pleasurable sensations. Despite the subjectivists' fastidious concern for individual "rights," their notion of revolutionary transformation is nothing less than a quest for a totalitarian communion in which individual consciousness is subsumed within a metaphysical union attained through collective affinity, or the "resonance of egoisms." The subjectivists' obsession with an absolute experiential immediacy cannot simply be attributed to a situationist exuberance, and their eulogization of "community" is not that far removed from that found in Fascist mythology. Both contain a fundamentally irrational element in their appeal to pure emotion, and both pursue a classical ideal, that of a transcendent beauty. For Ourselves present this "ideal beyond" in an undiluted form even as they ground it in the "individual": "Self-mastery, the conscious and *effective* wielding of myself for myself in the world, is indeed an *aesthetic* self-pleasure. It is the *art of life*." (*The Right to be Greedy*) In subjectivist mythology, history, even when its name is invoked, collapses into an apocalyptic act of transcendence: "In the moment of *social* revolution, the present, the *historical* present, the presence of history, opens up like the sky." Here, the sense of urgency (*the other side of desperation*) which For Ourselves display is itself a reflection of their chiliastic conception of the revolutionary millenium as the redemptive light opposed to the darkness of the capitalist world; in suitably hyperbolic language, they present the individual as confronted by an absolute choice between "revolution" or a "totalitarian nightmare." More recently, the didacticism and moralistic invective of For Ourselves have been consecrated in a higher reincarnation, that of Unitary Space-Time, which has presented a series of sermons on situationist theory through the surprisingly unilateral means of radio. Here, situationist theory becomes pure ideology and is reduced to a crude program for a situationist lifestyle which can be "taught" in the manner of the Esalen Institute. Meanwhile, the "theoretical" faction of For Ourselves has attempted to disassociate itself from the embarrassing consequences of the positions which it previously formulated; it will no doubt apply its primitive theoretical skills to more elevated subjects.

All serious attempts at a genuine critical autonomy in the American situationist movement started from essentially the same proposition: to elaborate a "native" theoretical base for a situationist practice in the U.S. and to critically engage the social

reality of American capitalism. This project involved the application of a prior model of theoretical analysis — that provided by the theses of the Situationist International — to the task of clarifying the specific features of the “American spectacle,” its structural principles and its contradictions, the latter of which were apparent in certain oppositional tendencies. From the inception of the American situationist movement, certain focal problems had been considered as crucial to its critical development: among these were the New Left and the cultural transformations concurrent to it. This orientation of criticism towards the New Left and the “counter-culture” was present in a rudimentary form in the polemical section of the American S.I.’s journal; however, this publication was less concerned with an extended interpretation of the New Left than with identifying — and denouncing — modernist ideology: e.g., McLuhan and the theorists of the New Left (Bookchin, Marcuse, Baran and Sweezy). The central concern of the American S.I. — whose project, because of internal dissensions, can almost be considered as abortive from its inception — was not even with the New Left, but rather, with the summarization of general situationist theses. (6) The unoriginality of the American S.I., if not surprising given the relative backwardness of American cultural theory in comparison to that of Europe, is nonetheless striking: in areas where they had no recourse to situationist theory, they simply relied on the most conventional of current leftist ideologies. Thus, in their major theoretical work, *Certain Extraordinary Considerations . . .*, one finds Chasse offering an unadulterated Leninist critique of imperialism, one which is a mere paraphrase of André Gunder Frank’s: “The imperial phase of western capitalism creates one-crop economies. Colonial countries are totally dependent on the world market, which is the market of capitalism. Imperialism appropriates the wealth of a country; the country is deprived of the fruits of its labor. The so-called poor countries become poorer; the imperial center more wealthy.”

The particularization of situationist theory in America was to be accomplished, with varying success, by two tendencies, *Diversion* and *Point-Blank*. Although *Point-Blank*’s analysis preceded *Diversion*’s by nearly a year, the latter stands, in both its membership and its perspectives, in a direct relationship to the American S.I., and thus corresponds theoretically, if not chronologically, to an earlier stage of the American situationist movement. Although Jon Horelick states, in *Beyond the Crisis of Abstraction . . .*, that “the appearance of *Diversion* did not bear the intention of either reviving a situationist movement or getting rid of one,” *Diversion* nonetheless attempts to become all that the American S.I. could, and in Horelick’s view, should have been: *Diversion #1* appears as a redemption of the American situationist movement in the face of its numerous failures. Contrary to what Chris Shutes and Isaac Cronin suggest in their pantomimed “skirmishes” with Horelick, *Diversion* doesn’t simply “operate from the same basic perspectives as the American section of the S.I.,” but proceeds from the same perspective as the S.I. as a whole.

Horelick's predicament results not from his positions being somehow insufficiently situationist, but rather, precisely from their being too situationist; the anachronistic character of much of *Diversion #1* must be ascribed to the outmoded quality of situationist theory itself. Horelick at least displays a superior intelligence to that of his critics, who, as the self-appointed inquisitors of the American situationist movement, engage in the most facile deprecations of Horelick's position, without having to concern themselves with an alternative. (7) However imperfectly, Horelick does attempt to analyze objective social reality: his article, *The Poverty of Ecology*, constitutes one of the most important contributions of situationist theory to an understanding of American capitalism. But the remainder of *Diversion #1* demonstrates how little, if any, theoretical progress Horelick has made since 1970, when a provisional version of this article appeared as *Strobe-Light Tyrannies of Adolescence*. His essentially static perspective leads him to a desperate attempt to find the practical confirmation of situationist theses in the contemporary practice of the American proletariat, and in so doing, he exaggerates the importance of certain actions. (8) For Horelick, situationist theory remains impervious to historical influence, and he maintains that the essential assumptions of the Situationist International still remain valid under present conditions. When, in *Beyond the Crisis of Abstraction*, Horelick offers an explanation for the impasse reached by the S.I. in its later period, he views it as an organizational rather than historical failure: in order to go "beyond the crisis of abstraction," it is necessary to recapture the bygone "excellence" of the S.I., both theoretically and organizationally. This allows his "critics" to score a few cheap points, but although they indirectly advance the need for a "supersession of situationist theory," they, at least, are hardly equal to the task.

Much in the same way as *Diversion*, the critical endeavors of Point-Blank suffered from their ultimate dependence on the theory of the S.I.* Although Point-Blank did attempt to engage historical realities and saw its task to be one of social criticism and not of mere commentary on secondary issues in situationist theory, at no time did we achieve an independent theoretical position from which to undertake a comprehensive investigation of the topics we had considered at that time to be pertinent. The critical achievements of Point-Blank should not be minimized, however: from the relatively minor accomplishment of an adequate critique of the New Left to the examination of issues that were inadequately treated in previous situationist theory (e.g., the implications of "generalized self-management" both in a specific historical situation — the Spanish Revolution — and as a theory of modern proletarian practice), we sought to verify situationist criticism in the light of recent history and to bridge the relatively large gap between the present and the point where previous situationist investigations had left off. Point-Blank's ability to extend the situationist theory of spectacle was demonstrated in our analysis of structural reforms in

* The authors of this text were formerly members of Point-Blank.

the social and cultural organization of American capitalism. By identifying the principal modernizing tendencies in the American "spectacle," we offered, however tentatively, a critique of contemporary social development as "spectacular" development. A series of transformations not immediately related to each other — increasing social equality, the emergence of participationist authority relations, environmental reform, and new developments in urbanism (9) — was integrated within a conceptual framework which attempted to establish the essentially reformist character of advanced capitalism and to indicate the various social ramifications of "spectacular" progress. Much less successfully, we also offered an "analysis" of the practical activity of the American proletariat in the period immediately preceding our critical endeavors and extrapolated out of certain events what we saw to be the historical trends of this class. But since we did not possess a theory of this proletariat and its practice, i.e., we did not explicate the various categories and subdivisions within this class and the objective determinants of its activity, the conclusions which we drew from Lordstown and other "autonomous" actions of the American proletariat lacked any sophistication; they appeared as unqualified assertions rather than working hypotheses.

However innovative certain of Point-Blank's lines of analysis were, they still did not represent a real advance in situationist theory. Our attempted reformulation of situationist theses was merely a modernization and relativization of a pre-existing critical position: the theory of the S.I. formed an analytical model for our critical inquiry, whose results were largely predetermined and predictable, in that they corresponded to the previously-defined expectations of situationist theory. For the most part, our theoretical project consisted of a mechanistic application of the situationist perspective to contemporary history, which was "examined" in order to find corroborative evidence for that perspective, and thus, in order to merely confirm the theory of the S.I. Our unconscious methodology proceeded from inverted bases: our theory existed prior to any substantive investigation of reality, rather than developing out of such research. Thus, our analysis was weakest precisely where situationist analysis itself was most deficient. For instance, our argument regarding the apparent "unification" of world capitalism amounted to a gross over-simplification of international realities. On the basis of a few spectacular, and largely superficial events (e.g., Nixon's visit to China), we virtually proclaimed a definitive resolution of inter-capitalist antagonisms within the current world order. Precisely because we did not penetrate the actual content of our subject and did not analyze the real bases and the real limits of such a unification process, our critique remained on an ephemeral level, that of "current events," and the transitory nature of this critique was soon evidenced: despite a few trenchant observations in *The Show Is Over*, many of our theses on the "end of the Cold War" were rapidly invalidated by history. This weak aspect of our analysis was not simply limited to one article, but

was, rather, a repeated tendency which must be attributed to our lack of a certain theoretical sophistication. This shortcoming resulted from our essential failure to grasp the material bases of modern capitalist society, a failure which can be seen in our consistent misinterpretation of provisional features in contemporary history. Above all, we failed to understand the specificity of the historical period we sought to examine, a period which corresponded in this instance to an expansionary phase of advanced capitalism; we did not recognize the objective limits of the "reformist" trends we had identified within American capitalism. To cite one example, it is precisely the most "modernistic" aspects of the American "spectacle" that we described in *The Changing of the Guard* which have proved to be the most expendable in the survival program of a depressed capitalism.

Our theoretical progress after the publication of the journal *Point-Blank #1* was at best sporadic; our further development took place within a series of critical interventions formulated in response to a number of radical phenomena (the Lip occupation, the Detroit wildcat movement of 1973, and the defeat of the Chilean working class, first by Allende and subsequently by the generals who overthrew him) which we considered crucial, and even exigent, to the elaboration of a contemporary revolutionary perspective. That our analysis was essentially reactive did not, however, mean that it was inconsequential: in confronting these issues, we were forced to rely, first with Lip and more importantly with Chile, on our own critical capacities rather than on the theory of the S.I. Our evaluation of the "strange defeat" of the Chilean Revolution, for example, involved an analysis of the precise context and chronology of the events we were interpreting and did not rely upon a previous theoretical construct in order to explain this "given" situation. Similarly, our ability to draw definite conclusions from events such as Lip demonstrated a certain theoretical decisiveness: in view of the embarrassed silence of the world situationist movement with respect to the events at Besancon, where workers, however imperfectly and in however mystified a fashion, attempted to translate the once-heralded slogans of May 1968 into practice, the forcefulness of our then-maintained position at least set us apart from the timid commentaries of others. Nonetheless, even these positive contributions were indicative of a simple reflexive attitude, one which was insufficiently reflective. Our critical development proceeded on a largely *ad hoc* basis, with our theoretical production representing essentially a series of improvisations without sufficient consideration of the "perspective" through which we viewed reality. In our reliance on the thought of the S.I., we advanced theoretical positions without confronting their real implications or possible contradictions; like so much of the American situationist movement, we had made situationist theory "our own" without first having mastered — and reworked — its conceptual development. This lack of a solid theoretical foundation had obvious consequences — specifically, in our inability to fully comprehend situationist theory and to understand

the finished program of the S.I. in relation to the changing historical circumstances in which we were attempting to develop a revolutionary practice. Although we certainly had not maintained an uncritical attitude towards the S.I. and had already (in *Point-Blank #1*) recognized the critical deficiencies of Debord and Sanguinetti in *61 Theses* . . . , we still viewed what we had by then perceived as the failure of the S.I. to have been an essentially practical failure. In minimizing the theoretical aspects of the S.I.'s default, in failing to realize that the collapse of the S.I. was related to the collapse of the historical basis underlying the situationist theory of modern proletarian revolution, we maintained that the impasse of the situationist movement could be resolved by practical means, namely through the realization, for the first time, of a genuinely practical situationist activity. This confusion was to become insupportable in our confused attack on Daniel Denevert's *Theory of Misery, Misery of Theory* (10), in which, while correctly attempting to refute Denevert's pseudo-interpretation of the situationist project's collapse, we merely reaffirmed the validity of situationist theory in the face of historical change, a change which had already escaped the power of the S.I. Despite our exploration of a few promising theses regarding the meaning of revolutionary activity as revolutionizing activity, we, like ultimately Denevert himself, did not view the failure of the S.I. as a theoretical failure.

Whatever the failures of *Diversion* and *Point-Blank* as revolutionary theorists, they at least corresponded to those of substantive — and, in this sense, complete — projects. If nothing else, this fact alone sets them apart from the situationist tendency which emerged from the ruins of a previous grouping, *Contradiction*. Certain survivors of this debacle, drawing renewed inspiration from Ken Knabb's *Remarks on Contradiction and its Failure* and later joined by others, among them a defector from *Point-Blank* (11), organized themselves as "autonomous" members of an informal federation, all of whom are affiliated with Knabb's Bureau of Public Secrets. (12) Although the theoretical output of the Knabbist axis amounts to very little in terms of conceptual presentation, they have achieved a certain preeminence within the American situationist movement by virtue of their sheer prolificacy, their ability to maintain at least the appearance of a continuing project. Here, it is worth noting that situationist analysis has not escaped its own rate of inflation: the real value of its content declines in proportion to the number of "situationist" texts. Nonetheless, the Knabbists have achieved at least a numerical superiority, and on this basis of this *de facto* supremacy — and additionally, through their observance of strictly orthodox situationist manners, this faction can rightly be considered as the legitimate heirs of the American situationist movement. The "success" of this axis, however, is paradoxically based on failure, not simply as a consequence of Knabb's self-effacing, yet no less self-serving, proposal to "fail clearly, each time, over and over," (*Double Reflection*) but in their direct relation to *Contradiction's* failure; the particular ideological development of Knabb and his

allies must be explained with reference to Contradiction's inability, in its unachieved "movement critique," to produce a contemporary social theory. Knabbist criticism begins with, and as, a collapse of theory as social criticism: beginning with *Remarks on Contradiction* . . . and culminating in *Double Reflection*, "theory" appears as *meta*-theory, as, in a restricted sense, a theory of theory and theorizing about theorizing. This deliberate narrowing of the scope of critical inquiry marks a retreat from an historical plane of analysis. Criticism becomes explicitly dehistoricized and no longer develops within an historical, i.e., social, frame of reference, but moves within its own "conceptual" universe. The "problematic" that informs the critical program of Knabb and his ideological *confrères* appears initially as an internal discourse within situationist theory. Their exegetical interpretation of the S.I.'s perspective involves simply an embellishment of details neglected by the S.I. and a clarification of existing situationist positions. For these critics, it is above all a matter of emphasis, of the stress which is to be placed on a few "integral" concepts within the situationist perspective. Despite the avowedly "experimental" method of this tendency, they have consistently relied on external stimuli to provide their critical impetus, and in the wake of the collapse of situationist theory with *61 Theses* . . ., the Knabbists have successfully attached themselves to a number of pseudo-theories ("character armor," "publicity," "distanciation") in order to "advance" situationist thought in new directions. Each "intervention" of the Knabbist tendency provoked endless repercussions within their movement and underwent a subsequent refinement: with the introduction of a new idea, the terminological context of debate shifted. The superficially changing discussion of these sub-theorists is less a reflection of their being attuned to historical change than an indication of the fundamentally spurious character of their various positions. By carefully avoiding any discussion of controversial topics in situationist theory — self-management and the theory of the spectacle, for example — they can maintain an illusory consistency in their thinking. The texts of Knabb & Co. do, however, reflect a certain ideological continuity: in all their writings, situationist theory remains a frozen totality. Here, the concept of spectacle, invoked as an explanation for every specific development in the modern world, is rendered completely abstract; not only does it anthropomorphically become a *persona* — Knabb, for instance, can speak of the "unconsciousness of the spectacle" as if the spectacle were itself a singular being — it becomes an exterior authority presiding over social life, a determining force not only on account of its determining processes, but simply because it is the "spectacle."

Although seemingly unimportant, the manner in which the critical interruptions of the Knabbists unfold is itself indicative of their theoretical underdevelopment. Their individual critiques appear in the form of *précis*, as brief expositions structured around a number of isolated *idées fixes*. These themes are not utilized as metaphors, but are meant as quite literal concepts, and the

importance which these recurrent motifs, taken from the texts of Voyer, Denevert, and Knabb himself, assume for this tendency reveals a lack of critical comprehension and invalidates whatever claim they may have to theoretical autonomy. The unoriginality of the Knabb axis can be seen, for instance, in their use of Jean-Pierre Voyer's *Reich: How To Use*. Voyer's abysmally superficial interpretation of Reichian analysis is virtually canonized by Knabb and his subsequent followers. (13) Even when this tendency attempts — quite self-consciously — to be original, their efforts amount only to a vulgar sociology in which situationist concepts are brought to bear on a few issues, isolated from any historical context: hence, their naive critique of capitalist socialization in the family (14) and their dated application of the situationist method of *dérive* to the critique of an urban environment. (15) Such a description of the Knabbist perspective, however, attaches too much importance to its theoretical content; the real concern of this modern-day school of "Critical Criticism" is not with theory as such but with the role of the theorist considered abstractly as "producer" and "concretely" as a particular individual, i.e., as a member of their tendency. The "critical" undertakings of the Bureau of Public Secrets and his allies find their culmination in the project of a "Phenomenology (*sic*) of the Subjective Aspect of Practical-Critical Activity." This concern with the subjective aspects of critical practice can only be understood in terms of a critical introversion, that of Knabbist theory's "turning in on itself," a withdrawal involving an actual disembodiment of criticism itself. In a very real sense, Knabbist criticism remains on the level of "being-in-itself."

This trivialization of theory appears not only in Knabb's crude parody of the Hegelian system but in his simplistic psychologization of "practical-critical activity." In the Knabbist cosmos, which is surprisingly impervious to historical change, the theorist becomes the "experiencing subject," who develops endlessly through a sequence of subjective "moments," arriving finally at an ultimate goal of "realization." This development, although erratic, is hardly dialectical: Knabb, in his Hegelian mimicry, does not even attempt a parallel construction to the latter's *Phenomenology*. His pseudo-phenomenology does not involve the subject's interpretation of the world as it appears to him; there is no movement analogous to the progression of naive consciousness from sense-certainty to perception to understanding. This fact, however, does not prevent Knabb from elevating himself and his cohorts to a position of world-historical status; having divested criticism of any social content, they invest every particular detail of their resistance to real theoretical activity — theory with an historical content — with historical profundity. In a certain sense, this *école* represents the ultimate in situationist subjectivism: they subjectivize theory so that it becomes simply personal criticism, a theory about themselves which supplies a *raison d'être* for their daily lives. As a result of this unshimmering banalization, their project becomes explicitly narcissistic, and their obsession with proto-theory, with the moments preceding the

"production" of theory, represents a glorification of the existing conditions of their critical impotence. This does not prevent them from endowing their discoveries with a vital significance. Thus, their *Phenomenology* is proclaimed to be crucial to the "world revolutionary movement"; it becomes "one of the global proletarian tasks of the coming decade," and the "question of the production of theory itself" is described as a "strategic problem facing the revolutionary movement." However much the actual "production of theory" may elude this tendency, at least the question of their *non*-production of theory is conveniently resolved by their "strategic" (i.e., opportune) concept of "behindism." This trifling, but surprisingly diffuse, notion serves two (confused) purposes: it offers both a subjective explanation of their objective condition (their historical backwardness can be attributed to the phenomenon of subjective behindism) and an objective explanation of their subjective condition (they are behindist because of the backwardness of the American situationist movement *vis-à-vis* the development of revolutionary theory). Behindism is thus simultaneously a psychological condition (pertaining to the "mental blocks" of the theorist), an explanation of the inequalities within the situationist movement (the inferior status of those who are "appropriating" situationist theory in relation to those who already have) and a social category. Furthermore Knabb announces that "the proletariat is collectively behindist as it struggles for the self-management of its own theory" — a statement which is as revealing of his mechanistic interpretation of the proletariat's acquisition of self-consciousness (theorists produce "theory," which is later "adopted" by the proletariat in its "practical search for truth") as it is of the absurdity of his "theory" of behindism. But the importance which this concept assumes for the mini-theorists of the Knabbist tendency cannot be minimized; in fact, it assumes a position of absolute centrality, a significance which exposes their theoretical project as an absolute vacuity. In a further installment of Knabb's *Phenomenology*, Chris Shutes, a slavish imitator who gives an added nuance to Knabb's idea of "double reflection," (Shutes is a reflection called forth by Knabb's text) continues his master's project by the curious method of *reductio ad absurdum*. In his both grammatically and critically illiterate text *On Behindism*, Shutes recasts Knabbist trivia in the form of an overblown aesthetic, and in the resulting kitsch, Stendhal's theory of love — crystallization — becomes, quite gratuitously, a description of the pre-coital moments before the climactic act of "theorizing." (15) Here, despite his tragico-heroic trappings, the behindist appears as the leading caricature in a situationist *commedia dell'arte*. The initiation rites of the pre-theorist correspond to the seven stations of the situationist cross: the road to Calvary is that which is traveled by the behindist, who is finally resurrected, after much travail, as the "theorist." Throughout all this *niaiserie*, the Knabbists, even by their own admission, reveal themselves as a "behindist" tendency within international revolutionary theory. In spite of their egregious attempts to remain *au courant* in situationist circles — through an

extensive reliance on their foreign allies — they appear as *démodé*, as a self-insulated anachronism within contemporary theoretical debate. It is not so much that the Knabbists themselves are in the *arrière-garde* of revolutionary tendencies, but that their thought occupies an *arrière-garde* position; it is formulated as a rear-guard action in the backwash of situationist theory. Their critical focus is particularly revealing: the Knabbists are not concerned with phenomena as such, but with epiphenomena, with secondary manifestations or after-effects arising from a primary source. The issues which the Knabb tendency choose to discuss are essentially derivative, or auxiliary to an original problem; thus, they are concerned not with the history of the situationist movement, but with the pro-situ; not with the psychological structures of social behavior, but with "character armor"; not with social criticism, but with theoretical *interpolation*.

The apparent uniformity of the Knabbist axis, i.e., their seamless transition from "issue" to "issue," is itself misleading. And the contradictions of their "perspective" are nowhere more transparent than in the various positions which they have taken regarding the Situationist International. Initially the most fervent admirers of situationist "excellence" — in *Remarks on Contradiction* . . . , Knabb can only affirm the "infallibility" of Debord and Sanguinetti in *61 Theses* . . . — Knabb & Co. wind up embracing an abstract denunciation of situationist theory as "one ideology of revolution among the others . . . expressing something other than what it believes it wants to say and serving ends other than its explicit ends." This *volte-face* is all the more surprising in view of the Knabbists' failure to explain it and only serves to point up their dependency on the ideas of others. Following their brief infatuation with Voyer, the Knabbists' romance with Daniel Denevert and their "use" of his text *Theory of Misery, Misery of Theory* (17) as a central reference point for their investigations were not simply accidental, but fortuitous: with one stroke, an authorized translation of Denevert, they "produced" an explanation of the historical failure of the situationist movement. The inadequacies of this explanation must rightfully be attributed not to the Knabbists, but to Denevert himself. Denevert's attempt to realize the project first put forward in *61 Theses*, that of "applying to the S.I. itself the critique which the S.I. had so correctly applied to the old world," is, in its result and its method, a miscarriage of critical thought. Denevert abstracts situationist theory from the historical environment of its development, and having considered it in isolation as an autonomous function, he proceeds to reinsert it into the fabric of modern society; thus, the failure of the S.I. is attributed to the "implicit situationism" of the "society of the spectacle." This teleological approach only succeeds in explaining the determinants of situationist activity from the final, immobilized form which this activity assumed: the spectacularization of the S.I. occurs as an intrinsic aspect of situationist practice, and not as a result of an historical modification of the conditions of that activity. The superficial nature of Denevert's critique derives from his crude

approximation, and even schematization, of reality in terms of its most "basic" tendencies. Thus, situationist theory appears as the "revolutionary theory of dissatisfaction" and the society of the spectacle as the "hierarchized consumption of goods." Ultimately, Denevert can only recognize the failure of the S.I. and cannot explain it in terms of its actual causation. The project which Denevert undertakes in so miserable a fashion — and does not come close to accomplishing — is itself tautological; it attempts to provide an explanation of the failure of the situationist movement simply by means of situationist concepts, and such internal criticism becomes a closed universe where a theoretical world replaces the historical one. And for all of Denevert's attempts to invalidate situationist theory, his analysis of its failure remains situationist; it is essentially a reformulation of the situationist concept of recuperation, only this time Denevert suddenly discovers that the expositors of recuperation have themselves been recuperated. Following a traditionally situationist approach, he has the S.I. appear as the avant-garde of an ultra-reformist capitalism, a system in which there are neither serious internal contradictions nor "conflicts of interest," a pure spectacle where ideology contains everything except "total revolution." Thus, in Denevert's simplistic world, the workers of Lip become merely the "ad-men" of the existing system. It is clear that Denevert cannot advance beyond the limits of situationist analysis. He himself speaks of a return to the original "situationist spirit" and seeks to continue the situationist program with those who would "live it all the way." Denevert's lack of any independent critical initiative is amply demonstrated in his abysmal attempts to formulate a theory of his own. Borrowing from a curious source, that of Brechtian dramatics, Denevert advances the notion of "distanciation" — which he most likely discovered in the pages of *Tel Quel* — as a positive goal to which consciousness must aspire, as in fact the very means by which a radical consciousness emerges. Denevert wishes to anchor theory to a viewpoint exterior to society, and "distanciation" amounts to the proposition that "consciousness" remove itself from an immediate social context and become a universal without ever having been concrete: "the negating faculty of distanciation can be understood as the faculty of turning in on oneself, as the faculty of breaking one's own immediate relations with existing conditions." From this "radical" isolationism, he even goes so far as to describe the revolutionary process as an "act of historical distanciation"; although this separation is termed an "historical movement," distanciation itself represents a disengagement from history. As a resolution to the problem of negating spectacular immediacy, Denevert's theory of distanciation is ultimately specious. While he speaks of it as a "process," he can only isolate two poles between which all movement falls: "total externality," and the "individual reconciled with his true individuality." Denevert wants to grasp the whole (Reality) without a corresponding knowledge of its parts (social determinants): in his principal text, both "consciousness" and the "proletariat" appear as self-

contained entities, and any possible interaction between these categories and their determining context is lost. Having discovered, with Debord, that all of the social terrain is occupied by ideology, Denevert wishes to prevent any possible contamination of consciousness by having it appear *ex nihilo*. He seeks to erect a *cordon sanitaire* around the spectacle in order to contain its corrupting powers of recuperation. The poverty of Denevert's theses is inextricably linked to that of his method, and the impairment of his faculty of abstraction is amply evidenced in his absurd proposition regarding the relative importance of form *vis-à-vis* content: "Dialectical intelligence, on the contrary, must draw its anti-ideological force by attaining the perception of form, the intelligence of the processes concealed under the immediate perception of content. In this passage of sheer sophistry, it is possible to interchange "form" and "content" and produce an equally valid statement.

For all his attempts to demythologize the S.I., Denevert only reinforces the myth of the "historical role" of the S.I., that of its preponderant influence on modern history; however negatively, he still idealizes the S.I., which remains the focal point of his critique. The S.I. has the same importance for Denevert as it does for the pro-situs — in the last analysis, the S.I. is more important than its time. This same ambivalence *vis-à-vis* the S.I. is to be found in the perspective of Denevert's American followers; having adopted Denevert's critique of the S.I. as their own, they still nonetheless seek to maintain their situationist credentials. Even if the Situationist International is no longer the embodiment of theoretical truth, its legacy remains the exclusive inheritance of a select few of situationist initiates, an elite which not uncoincidentally consists, at least temporarily, of the Knabbists. In his poster, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, Knabb himself wishes to play the role of curator of the situationist movement: since everyone outside of himself and his associates is unable to interpret the situationist project, Knabb takes upon himself the tasks of explaining the S.I. and of translating its texts. In the Knabbists' view, the S.I., even in its posthumous existence, is accorded a crucial significance to the American proletariat: "while the new class struggle has not lagged behind that of the other modern industrialized countries, its *consciousness of itself* has (the fact that the principal texts of the Situationist International are not yet available in the most advanced spectacular society is merely the most glaring expression of this theoretical underdevelopment)." (18) The importance of the S.I. thus confers importance upon its heirs; as self-appointed guardians of the "truth," they seek to defend the purity of situationist doctrine. And in setting themselves up as a situationist inquisition, they pronounce anathema upon various "heretics" (or rivals) in the situationist camp.

If the Knabbists have avoided the ephemerality of the subjectivist school of situationism, they have in no sense overcome the marginal social position of the situationist milieu, since the "forward position" they claim to hold is located within the social *cul-de-sac* of the American intellectual lumpenproletariat.

Marginality is in fact celebrated by the Knabb axis: as self-conscious *déclassés*, they are automatically "distanciated" from society and consider themselves separate from both the hippy-New Left "stratum" and the proletariat. Their own unsophistication in matters of "class analysis" is demonstrated in their positive description of the proletariat as "direct producers of commodities" and their vulgar glorification, one which is worthy of PL, of workers as those who "take their alienation straight." But this obvious distance from the arena of social conflict does not trouble them, since they view their own activity as directly parallel to that of the "proletariat": behind their every individual action stand historical forces. Their theoretical activity is seen as complementary to — and even prefiguring — radical social practice; they are the communicators of "revolutionary self-consciousness," which needs only to be joined to proletarian struggles. They appear *ex mirabilis* as the "consciousness" of the proletariat, and their theory becomes automatically a "proletarian" theory, although it is precisely a theory of the proletariat which they lack. Despite their fundamentally inward direction and the particularity of their concerns, they construct an imaginary constituency to whom they address their "findings." As Knabb's Bureau suggests, they are "public officials" who make appropriately officious declarations on behalf of "revolutionary" opinion. This substitutionism, in which the Knabbists represent others even while speaking only "for themselves," occurs not on a Leninist level where the vanguard party substitutes itself for the proletariat, but with theorists substituting themselves for actual revolutionary forces.

The role of revolutionary surrogate which the Knabbist clique plays is of course not explicit, and in order to maintain a semblance of conventional avant-gardism, they fabricate an "international revolutionary movement" which "began diffusedly in the fifties and obtained its first decisive victories in the open struggles of the sixties (and which) is already entering a new phase," and which, despite all obstacles, assumes ever-increasing proportions, is one of the Knabbists' most significant achievements: the revolutionary movement is the tangible and immediate power which gives meaning to their "contributions." However subordinate the matters they address may be, their writings become part of a general "current" of radical opposition to capitalism, and the issues they leave unexplained already possess their "answer" in the international activity of the proletariat; the failure of this movement, a crisis which would necessitate a drastic reevaluation of their theses, is simply not admitted.

The Knabbists, however, really cannot be held accountable for their stupidities, since their "theory" is in a continual process of self-correction. With a disarming and disingenuous candor, they are ready to concede every mistake, except the essential mistake on which their entire tendency is based. Their forthrightness does not prevent them from issuing, to the accompaniment of rhetorical bombast, various autocratic pronouncements in which they

demand the world's attention, if not its allegiance. Often, their language is appropriately confessional and self-deprecating, and they are willing to admit the errors of their ways, if only to make these errors more precise. Their self-criticism is such that it is able to proceed *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseam*.

It is, of course, no accident that Point-Blank formed a primary object of the Knabbists' scorn: we, and later Diversion, constituted the most formidable threat to their hegemonic ambitions. In our precocious development from pupils of Contradiction to "theorists" who were at least more autonomous than those of Contradiction, Point-Blank appeared as the *enfant terrible* of the American situationist movement — whereas the situationist elders were merely content to guard the treasure of the situationist critique, we at least were able to develop this critique by applying it to an analysis of contemporary social reality. In retrospect, and not simply in the gratuitous assessment of Knabb and his friends, Point-Blank seems more *enfant* than *terrible*; our facile appropriation of a situationist perspective and our consequent ability to produce a situationist "analysis" of certain issues did not mean that we had progressed beyond an infantile stage of theoretical development and had begun to develop original ideas. If we recognize the failure of Point-Blank, it is certainly not out of a capitulation to our former antagonists. Our present interests lie outside the situationist movement, and our disagreements are not with this or that situationist group, but with the ensemble of existing situationist tendencies. Our abandonment of a situationist perspective is not an abandonment of radical criticism; it is, rather, a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions — in this case, the mystifications of the situationist critique. Our denial of the validity of a contemporary situationist theory is also a rejection of the possibility of a contemporary situationist practice — if, indeed, a situationist practice ever existed as more than a stated objective, and in this respect, our own experiences are particularly illuminating. Although our agitational history was to a certain extent really experimental in that we carried out a definite, albeit limited, sabotage of the most visible mechanisms (news media, government publicity) of the "public sphere" of modern capitalist society, we were never able to achieve a sustained practical activity. Our sporadic "interventions" remained on the level of non-practice, precisely because we were unable to become an historical force and concretely link our practice with social practice. (19) While the marginal influence of our activity can be superficially attributed to the marginality of its origins, our practical failure must finally be attributed to theoretical weakness, to contradictions in our assumptions about practice. We never arrived at a sufficient comprehension of what revolutionizing activity is and could be, nor did we understand the context — the contradictions of American society — in which we attempted to establish our own practice.

V

"Nothing is so dangerous as being too modern; one is apt to grow old-fashioned rather suddenly." — Oscar Wilde.

What has hitherto been understood by radical theorists as the "modern revolutionary movement" is *shattered*; it only lingers as an image of opposition to advanced capitalism. The currents which issued from May '68 subsided at the moment when they were forced to become, rather than simply appear to be, something serious. Today, the question is not whether these spent forces of the student and worker extreme left are in a state of regroupment, but whether the possibility of a new revolutionary movement can be discerned within the present situation. Any attempt to establish any real continuity between past and current developments is a forced connection: to advance the idea of a single, uninterrupted movement that has evolved from a student to a proletarian base is to ignore the new social and political realities — which are often not radical at all — in advanced capitalism. The dispersed, isolated tendencies which comprise the remnants of "authentic" revolt against "spectacular" power will be differentiated on the basis of *how* — not if — they respond to these fundamentally altered conditions. Those who simply look within present reality in order to confirm an already-formulated theory will not participate in the further progress of radical criticism; it is, after all, precisely the most modernistic features of situationist theory which have proved to be the most problematic (the cybernetic welfare state, the primacy of "spiritual" poverty over material poverty in modern society). In this respect, situationist theory conveys a false sense of grandeur: it appears to have resolved all theoretical problems when in fact it hardly begins to discuss them. To speak of more contemporary issues, the present world economic crisis has outdistanced avant-garde theory. The unexpected character of capitalism's most recent crisis and the unanticipated crisis of its opposition have left this theory quite literally in a critical predicament. And if situationist theory has hitherto ignored the critique of the *political economy* of the spectacle, it has done so at its own peril and now bears the consequences of this disdain for the "dismal science." Given such a critical deficiency, all talk of how much the S.I. was able to "anticipate" current events can only be ironical; the defects of the situationist critique have their origins in the theoretical immaturity of the S.I. It is not that situationist theory is simply in need of revision, but that it is useless, and this inutility can be measured by the distance of situationist criticism from the concrete. The theoretical tendencies which based themselves on the analysis of the S.I. are unable to comprehend, much less interrupt, the course of contemporary history. Any theoretical tendency's downfall begins when it can no longer prove its superiority on its chosen field, and given the prolonged conceptual impasse of extremist criticism, it is not surprising that new

contributions to social analysis have come from circles which were once dismissed by the S.I. as "ideological." Within the vacuum of extremist theory itself, the anachronistic positions of the ultra-left have come to enjoy, *faute de mieux*, a certain preeminence. No comprehensive perspective has emerged to supplant the supposedly "coherent" one of the S.I., and in view of the present fragmentation of situationist theory into various disciplines — radical psychology, sociology, etc. — the importance of a unitary (i.e., integrated) social criticism becomes even more important. But before revolutionary criticism can be renewed, it must account for the collapse of its previous perspectives, and having done so, its development of further positions must not consist simply of a reconceptualization of situationist theory, but of establishing new theoretical bases for the "critique of existing conditions." Nothing can be considered as given — such issues as the "modern proletariat," which has been considered almost as an undifferentiated category, and the spectacle must be subjected to new interpretations. What is in fact required is a new theory of social history corresponding to changed (objective) circumstances; and such a theory will only emerge through an analysis of the exact historical configurations of the present epoch. Criticism must specify the precise determinants of the contemporary social situation. Theory must decisively orient itself towards social transformation, and the lines of its analysis must parallel the developmental planes of its objects, primary among these being international capitalism. Like all revolutionary theory, this criticism must express itself as a theory of contradiction, as an explanation of the essential, and therefore basic, antagonisms within the social formations with which it is concerned. To deny the continued validity of existing interpretations of contradictions within capitalist society is not to deny the existence of such contradictions, but to dispute the way in which they appear within previous explanations. The task of developing alternative critical positions involves an articulation of theory out of an analysis of contemporary issues, and not the reverse, a mechanistic application of theoretical models to reality. However much a new revolutionary perspective may be grounded in previous traditions — i.e., Marxian theory — it must appear as the product of sustained practical research, rather than arise as an *a priori* interpretation of events.

In radical theory, as elsewhere, old myths die hard. One of the most persistent of such illusions has been the myth of a unified international movement, in which various scattered instances of "social" revolt have been imbued with a formal unity. Those who contrive the image of a single global class struggle which is "irreducibly" present everywhere and which manifests itself, if not in an identical form, then in an identical content, cannot establish any real unity among the isolated events they analyze, precisely because they cannot establish the real specificity of these events. Unless theory is able to comprehend the

particularity of social conflict and describe the precise context in which such conflict emerges, it cannot generalize from the specific to the universal, i.e., reason inductively. Much of extremist theory, however, fails to recognize, much less explain, the differing levels of development within international opposition to capitalism. Thus, the fact that a radical social crisis has recently emerged in such countries as Egypt, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, while remaining only latent in others, is incomprehensible within such an idealized interpretation of contemporary history. The repeated failure of social reality to behave in ways which theory predicted it "should" is nowhere more evident than in the present economic crisis of advanced capitalism, where the issues which situationist theory once dismissed as irrelevant — pertaining to those of material survival, wage demands, etc. — have become paramount. Behind situationist criticism's inability to anticipate the primacy of economic issues — rather than ones relating to social authority — in affecting the development of proletarian consciousness, and hence, activity, lies a more general failure to advance a theory of social praxis and its objective determination. In order to correct such a deficiency, "qualitative" criticism must investigate the precise factors which condition social practice; it must elaborate a complex dialectic involving the relation between the specific socio-economic environment within which the proletariat is situated and the "internal" movement of the proletariat. What is required is thus not just a theory of the proletariat as a revolutionary class but a theory of the proletariat as it exists presently within capitalist society and of the cumulative process of its development into a revolutionary class. With respect to this latter process, the question of the politicization of the proletariat, considered not in the narrow sense of bourgeois politics, but in the sense of the extension of proletarian demands beyond a "redress of grievances" within the capitalist economy, must be confronted. Since the present economic crisis of capitalism is quite naturally also a social crisis (manifested in unemployment), a crisis which contains the possibility of a crisis of social power, such theoretical concerns become decisive. The present crisis imposes immediate exigencies upon all "far left" theoretical tendencies: either these currents will be able to respond effectively to new historical conditions, or else they will disappear as theoretical elements. These requirements are obviously different for critical tendencies than for the conventional organized left, which has already established a certain presence in proletarian sectors. For the theorists of the extreme left, their separation from the proletariat assumes the dimensions of a *crise de conscience*, one which results from the discrepancy between the theorists' affirmation of a "proletarian theory" and their objective removal from the proletariat; it arises from the "pernicious chasm" which divides theoretical knowledge from its practical effect. And this crisis is not only a crisis of conscience, but one of *consciousness*, reflecting the divorce of theoretical understanding and proletarian consciousness.

If, as Lukács maintains, capitalism's economic contradictions

only assume revolutionary proportions when the proletariat perceives them subjectively, as a crisis of its own power, consciousness then becomes central to contemporary discussions, and more importantly, to those tendencies which are seeking to become revolutionary formations. Unless a radical grouping is to assume a purely passive role in history, awaiting the "spontaneous" appearance of a proletarian revolution, it must consider the question of the "introduction" of theoretical perspectives into proletarian struggles and define its project around the generalization of proletarian class consciousness. For the radicalized intelligentsia, such a consideration must initially proceed from an examination of its objective social position. Here, the distance between theory and practice is fundamentally the distance between those who conceive of the necessity of the proletariat's becoming a revolutionary class and this social class itself. This disjunction — and the contradictions which it embodies — forms the real context within which any organizational problematic for a radical tendency whose activity is based outside the proletariat must develop. For such a tendency, all practical questions must be posed in relation to the critical distinction between revolutionary practice as conducted by a small theoretical elite and revolutionary practice as the practice of a class. As long as this distinction remains, a primary question for theory is that of understanding the precise role of revolutionary organization as a practical force engaged in radicalizing activity. It is an indication of the extent to which this subject has been neglected in contemporary theory that one has to go back to such an impoverished source as Lukács to find even a tentative discussion of a "theory of practice." For instance, it is worth noting that if the S.I. always insisted on the importance of organization, it nonetheless did not escape a definite spontaneist orientation in its practice. The S.I. really had no theory of organization; it viewed its organizational activity passively, seeing it as a mere expression of a larger "revolutionary movement." The S.I. could only proclaim a vague identity between its practice and that of workers, without ever examining the real relationship between the two. Furthermore, the S.I.'s approach to the "concrete," its perception of what was important in contemporary history, revealed a fundamental weakness in its practical orientation. Its view of the objective role of a revolutionary organization was less concerned with the immediate effects of organized practice than with the ultimate goal towards which this practice was directed — the "total transformation of social life." Its lack of concern for the direct impact of its practice was seen as a proof of its revolutionary integrity, indicating a refusal to compromise with the "issues of the day," but this presumptuous attitude also condemned it to a position of historical inconsequence.

As with most of the non-Leninist left, the situationist movement has always been more concerned with what a revolutionary organization is *not* rather than with what a revolutionary organization *is*. It should be evident, however, that

the denunciation of Leninism does not in itself resolve the problem of vanguardism and revolutionary practice; the relation of any "conscientious minority" to proletarian movements is implicitly hierarchical. Despite their habitual (and necessarily self-effacing) description of themselves as "conscientious proletarians," revolutionary theorists, as part of a distinct social category, the intelligentsia, are products of the existing division of labor in capitalist society. Theoretical knowledge, like the academic disciplines it incorporates, is itself specialized, and it is produced by (self-proclaimed) "experts," remaining largely inaccessible to those outside the "academy," and thus, precisely to those it is intended to influence. Furthermore, theoretical knowledge confers proprietary rights upon its possessors, being an instrument which, under present circumstances, can be wielded only by a privileged few, even as it seeks to attack the basis of this privilege. The modern-day Conspiracy of Equals is carried out on the hierarchical terrain of existing society, and to a certain extent, vanguardism is not only avoidable, but necessary. All theory, whether consciously or not, is avant-gardist if it is really radical and expresses historical movement; theory emerges as a consciousness of history, a rising above immediate reality which places itself in a relatively narrow forward position within contemporary ideas. But the knowledge which it presents must be communicated to others if it is to become social theory, and it is in its transmission as much as in its conception that theory becomes socialized, that is, reencounters its object, but this time acting upon, rather than simply comprehending, reality. And if theory forms the basis of organized activity, then practice itself must be aligned in an historical direction: *a radical grouping only attains an avant-garde status when it is able to anticipate social change and to historicize its practice, i.e., project itself into a determining role within social praxis.* Theoretical consciousness, however, does not *ipso facto* result in an interventionist capability: it is not enough simply to interpret social reality, theory must prove the validity of its interpretation within reality. All pretensions — situationist and otherwise — to the contrary, practice can only be considered as revolutionary when it is activity which revolutionizes existing social conditions. Radical praxis must be explained as historical mediation, as a mediation between people and their history. Theoretical consciousness is here placed at the middle of things: at the same time that it strives to become a practical force, it must incorporate reality on a conceptual level. It must define reality and its possibilities. It is in this sense that "intervention" can be understood literally as a *coming between*, as a radical separation of alienated social forces and alienated social relations. This coming apart can obviously only lead to the creation of new social relations. Such an activist conception of organization should not be misunderstood: to restate the obvious, an organization is only revolutionary to the extent that it becomes an historical subject, initiating and consciously "directing" (in the sense of shaping) social transformation. And it becomes so only by actively situating

itself in such a way as to effect change; it must place itself at the very center of social contradictions precisely in order to intensify them, and thus, resolve them in a radical fashion. But it is quite evident that practice cannot be seen in terms of a "will to power," as if a group could command influence over events simply because it displays an ambition for such power. In its "drive for hegemony" (or theoretical and practical "supremacy"), an organization with revolutionary aspirations encounters the objective constraints to its activity; it is constrained not only by its own limitations (the degree to which it has an impact upon events), but by historical development. Here, as poor Lukács once remarked, "only the dialectics of history can create a radically new situation," and the "autonomy" of a group is thus only limited. The bases of all radical activity are historical ones, and it is these bases alone which confirm — or refute — a theoretical perspective.

Organizational practice can be defined as the externalization of critical activity, but this definition, far from providing an answer to the question of a contemporary revolutionary practice, only states the crux of the problem. It is one thing to recognize that radical theory must establish its own immediacy and that critical activity must relativize itself and achieve a position of influence in the objective field of its description; it is another to describe how this relativization is to take place. While such a question cannot be resolved in the space of the present text, one can delineate, even simplistically, two of its aspects: the integration of revolutionary activity within contemporary social practice, that is, the concretization of its theory; and the direction of social praxis towards revolutionary ends. The existing models of "revolutionary practice" only represent an isolation of the aspects of this process, and in doing so, distort the content of each. Militantism, although achieving a crude specificity, completely subsumes practice within the issues of capitalist reformism, while its apparent opposite, the principled contemplative attitude favored by the situationists and others, only attains a "qualitative" ephemerality. If the consequences of militantism are obvious, those of anti-militantism are less so — however, they represent equally false alternatives. In its inability to connect itself to historical development, to link itself with present historical struggles, anti-militantism only sublimates its negativity, and the practice of extremist theoretical tendencies is therefore conducted vicariously. Such tendencies, for example, idealize the "inherent radicalism" of wildcat strikes and factory sabotage, while expediently ignoring the resemblance between "unofficial" actions and official ones, namely, their common origins in localized disputes and their organization around specific demands. The contradiction between specificity and total opposition cannot be easily resolved, but the possibility of a solution can be located in the joining of the categories of concrete and universal in a revolutionary strategy. If the degree to which the strategy of a revolutionary organization becomes the strategy of a class is dependent upon historical circumstances, it is nonetheless possible to distinguish two issues which any successful

revolutionary strategy must confront. The strategic concerns of practice are, quite simply, the acceleration of revolutionary class consciousness and its necessary concomitant, the revolutionary self-organization of the proletariat. Radical practice must be conceived of as the synthesis of these two strategic dimensions, as communicative activity which embodies both the generalization of consciousness and the creation of autonomous organizational forms. Strategic theory is thus in its very essence a theory of combat in which the tactical questions so long neglected by extremist theory become crucial, and it is a theory not of Revolution in the abstract but of revolution as a process and of its corresponding stages of radicalization. On this level of concern, radical perspectives only attain specificity by apprehending, and thus critically appropriating, the immediate issues through which opposition constitutes itself, not in order to preserve them, but precisely in order to raise them to the level of the general. Revolutionary strategy only becomes important when it is elaborated during a period when social contradictions materialize rather than remain hypothetical. Under "optimum" conditions of social conflict, the alternatives confronting revolutionaries are reduced to either "pure" (and purely marginal) theoretical research or a conscious attempt to connect their practice to that of radicalized sectors of the proletariat. An ability to effect such a vital connection depends upon the successful implementation of a revolutionary strategy, and this implementation initially has more effect on the strategists themselves rather than on the social forces they are attempting to influence. For contemporary theorists, the essential transformation is that of a critical tendency into a revolutionary formation capable of sustained practical intervention within society. Such a formation must not only be able to "communicate theory," but must also be able to explode false consciousness at the very point of its production and consumption. This intervention against social ideology does not, in the condescending language of certain situationists, "prepare the way for the proletariat," but rather, provides an actual basis for opposition. Here, the correspondence between "proletarian" tendencies and revolutionary formations whose activity, whatever the class composition of its members, arises outside of an immediate context within the capitalist work force, becomes crucial. The viewpoint of such formations on this matter is necessarily distorted by the very fact of their indirect relation to class struggle; they tend to view the proletariat as an inert mass in need of theoretical direction even as it remains supposedly capable of "radical autonomy" and tend to conveniently ignore the possibility that the development of radical consciousness within sectors of the work force would render their own theoretical tendencies completely irrelevant. Even now, with the growth of rank-and-file movements and caucuses within the work force, the connection between a conscious minority of the proletariat and a conscious minority of the intelligentsia must be confronted — more so, obviously, by the latter. Assuming that the role of theoretical

tendencies still remains vital in the project of developing class consciousness, and thus, of clarifying the issues of contemporary "political" debate, the question of revolutionary organization can still be considered, however one-sidedly, by such tendencies. A revolutionary organization must itself be capable of opening a revolutionary front against capitalism; it cannot proceed, as some would have it, from the proposition that the proletariat is "already in revolt," but must itself seek to create foci of radical opposition. Needless to say, theoretical tendencies, unlike Lenin, will not be delivered in a sealed train to the revolutionary front; they will have to construct both the train and the rails. Historically, revolutionary organizations have become such only in their ability to mobilize social forces, to *make history*. However much it may contradict the "egalitarian" (*sic*) principles of the S.I., revolutionary mobilization does not involve the integration of the revolutionary organization within the proletariat, but the integration of the proletariat within revolutionary organizational structures (even when organized revolutionary tendencies emerge within the proletariat itself, they do not aim to assimilate themselves into the rest of their class, but to strive for preeminence within that class). But unless Leninism offers the only "road to the proletariat," a revolutionary organization cannot play the role of a "general staff" to the workers' army, yet that is precisely the role projected by even the most "anti-hierarchical" theory, where "consciousness" is identified, however implicitly, with an ability to command. Within present conditions, the "transformation of consciousness into conscious existence" appears as a contradiction, as a separation between theory (theorists) and practice (the proletariat). This separation cannot be resolved by any theoretical argument; its attempted solution remains the crucible in which any contemporary radical practice will be tested.

The present economic crisis of capitalism affords unique opportunities, while presenting unique difficulties, for a revolutionary practice based on a "unitary critique"; the social dislocations caused by the current near-depression give a precise meaning to the theory of alienation in capitalist society, but at the same time a concretization of this theory is required if it is to retain any relevance. In a period of high unemployment, the critique of alienated labor loses its absolute centrality; it is alienated existence in its entirety which must be put into question. The practical translation of a particularized qualitative critique of capitalist society must involve a direct challenge to militantism on its own ground, without, however, succumbing to the obvious temptation of *ouvrierisme*, i.e., an exclusive orientation towards productive sectors on account of their strategic importance. This rejection of a narrow definition of the "working class" does not mean that the situationist theory of the modern proletariat should simply be invoked instead; rather, it is precisely this theory which must be proved in the current period. Either the various sectors of the "proletariat" in American society will demonstrate a radical commonality of interests against capital, or else this theory will

have to be rejected. The unification of the proletariat can hardly be considered as a given; rather, it is something which has yet to be accomplished and remains the very rationale of revolutionary organizations. All illusions about the proletariat must be abandoned: the situationist myth of an intuitively "radical" proletariat engaged in spontaneous activity is only the other side of the militants' crude adulation of the misery of working-class culture. In the present crisis, the praise of isolated acts of proletarian resistance is less important than undertaking a concentrated assault on the ideological dependency of the proletariat on economic and social institutions. It is of course not enough merely to point out the insufficiencies of present opposition to capitalism; the revolutionary tendency must formulate a positive response to capitalism's crisis. The attack upon the ideological crisis of the proletariat must at the same time be an indication of the precise means of superseding the forms to which the proletariat is presently subservient. In view of current social reality, the automatic response of traditional situationist theory — having the proletariat seize control of the means of production and form workers' councils — is no longer sufficient: these proposals are as archaic as their terminology. In order to formulate a contemporary strategy, various new factors must be taken into consideration — for example, in a depressed economy, the locus of social conflict shifts from a direct contestation of capitalist power to a general challenge of social authority, an opposition which arises, strictly speaking, outside of production. Even if this were not so, the question of the revolutionary administration of society as a whole has hardly been adequately treated, and it would still be necessary to analyze traditional themes such as those of "mass strike" and "revolutionary insurrection" on a comprehensive basis. Existing leftist theories of social transformation are no more germane to reality than the predictable rhetoric within which they are couched. And while the present text does not pretend to have formulated an alternative, it does at least recognize the complexity of the issues confronting radical criticism in the present era.

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Up until now, the situationists, like their predecessors, have interpreted the world — and have disappeared in so many ways. Our attempt to explain the failure of the situationist project has been less an attempt to resurrect this project than to clarify certain issues which are central to contemporary radical debate. Our somewhat tedious examination of a radical theory of the past will hopefully prepare the way for an investigation of present historical realities, their causes and ramifications. This task, however, has not been undertaken simply because of its importance for contemporary theory, but rather, was imposed on us by our foregoing participation in the situationist movement; it has been a just retribution for our previous mistakes. Nonetheless, without making any pretensions to a similarity in theoretical content, our

position is analogous to that of Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. If nothing else, we have achieved a certain "self-clarification." But at the same time, we have become increasingly aware of our irrelevancy in the contemporary situation; to a certain extent, the present text represents time lost for ourselves in relation to the development of a modern revolutionary theory. It is an extended, if necessary, digression which reveals more about what we don't know than about what we do. At present, our tendency is a practical nullity in terms of its ability to play a significant social role in creating an opposition to capitalism, and in terms of theoretical research, the necessary prerequisite to any practice, our project has only begun. This text is a transitional document: in the course of its writing, our perspectives have changed. Within the space of these pages, we have outlined our critical concerns, but these remain to be amplified. In a very real sense, we are forced to begin again as theorists, and this renewal brings with it both a real theoretical independence and a corresponding intellectual primitiveness. The future of our tendency is uncertain, but necessarily so; it must bring new perspectives.

—David Jacobs & Christopher Winks
for the tendency *Perspectives*

NOTES

1. Although certain concepts in this section (e.g., the notion of "legitimation process") are derived from the work of Jürgen Habermas, the critique of advanced capitalism presented here was written without access to his *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* and prior to its recent publication in an English edition. This qualification should not be construed as a claim for the "originality" of our theses; rather, it only means that our analysis does not confront, except obliquely, extant theories of advanced capitalism. Such a confrontation will take place in another context.

2. Cf. in particular Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published by Seabury Press.

3. The following theses from Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* are cited in this section: 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20, 23, 24, 25, 34, 42, 43, 48, 50, 53, 56, 57, 63, 68, 71, 202.

4. Cf. Jean Baudrillard. *La Société de Consommation*, 1971. Editions Denoël.

5. Cf. Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*, p. 188-193. 1972, Pantheon Books.

6. Robert Chasse's important text *Robin Hood Rides Again* can be considered as an approximation of the American S.I.'s critique of the New Left.

7. Diversion, P.O. Box 321, 542 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, New York 11215. Horelick's rejoinder to Shutes and Cronin, *On Not Knowing How to Read or Write*, demonstrates his polemical skills: the text is not without a certain laconic wit, evidenced in Horelick's pointed comments about "argumentatism." Unfortunately, his anti-critique shows that he has not progressed theoretically beyond the positions outlined in *Diversion #1*. For instance, he offers the most crude, mechanistic explanation of the distinction between white and blue-collar workers, a distinction made on the basis of the differing degrees of "use-value" which are supposedly "at the source of their labor." Horelick extends this surprisingly vulgar line of analysis to maintain that "the heavy industrial workers, joined by those of the service and distribution sectors, shoulder the immediate possibility of total self-management."

8. "Throughout *Diversion*, class struggle appears to take place *outside* your organizational problematic. Your essentially contemplative attitude is typified in your article *News of Disalienation*, which is just that — *news*. With a surfeit of uncritical approbation, you present a *journalistic* account of the most recent events in 'radical history.' Your piece reads like the soundtrack to an ultra-leftist newsreel in which you appear only as the *cheerleaders* of your own passive 'enthusiasm.' Despite the selective nature of your digest, you bring little light to bear on the historical subjects whose actions you admire. . . . In your inflated estimation of such events as the AIM *putsch* at Wounded Knee, you reveal a desperate voluntarism. Your tendency to substitute wish-fulfillment for analysis is revealed in the ridiculous statement: 'It is our hope that the workers' actions will be influenced by revolutionary criticism.' In your own precise and impotent language, you merely *affirm* the class struggle. This affirmation, moreover, is only of the *image* of class

struggle. Since you view contemporary opposition to spectacular society only as a series of (to use your words again) 'external moments,' it is not surprising that you have few conclusions to draw from or about it. Your 'critique' begins only with an idealized representation of the 'proletariat in revolt.' (...) We leave you to contemplate the 'best moments of our past' in the mirror-image of an elusive radicalism, an image you so desperately construct in your meticulous *replica of Internationale Situationniste*." Excerpt from a letter from Point-Blank to Jon Horelick, September 9, 1973. It is not merely of academic interest that this letter was written six months before Shutes and Cronin's *Skirmishes with an Untimely Man*.

9. It is not surprising that this list corresponds in many ways to the demands put forward by the New Left; our critique of capitalist reform suffered from our excessive attempt to view this reform as an incorporation of New Left programs. This is only one example, and far from the worst, of a facile situationist analysis of "recuperation."

10. Published in French under the title *La Mise Misérable*, this critique was written in March 1974, six months before Denevert's text appeared in an American edition. We can furnish an English translation of *La Mise* . . . to those who want it.

11. Chris Shutes (P.O. Box 4502, Berkeley, California 94704), whose attack on Point-Blank several months after his resignation was responded to appropriately in *Miserable Publicity*.

12. Bureau of Public Secrets, P.O. Box 1044, Berkeley, California 94704.

13. If Reichian theory is insufficient as an explanation of the possible relevance of radical psychoanalysis to the theory of alienation, Voyer's is even more so. Not only does he, following Reich, exaggerate the importance of character, he does not even confront Reich's relation to Freud, the grounding of Reich's analysis in the Freudian notions of superego, character, and auto-repression, or concern himself with other dimensions of Freudian analysis. Having abandoned the grandiose — and ludicrous — project of a *Phenomenology of the Absence of Spirit*, Voyer's latest critical work has assumed the more modest form of an *Introduction to the Science of Publicity*. With this work, Voyer seeks to provide a philosophical complement to the situationist theory of the spectacle, and specifically, to elaborate an ontology of spectacular being. In this pseudo-philosophical pseudo-ontology, Voyer attempts to incorporate the Marxist theory of alienation within the Hegelian system, and in the process does disservice to both. Although he clamorously proclaims the "return of German thought" — as if it had ever been away — Voyer only proves that he is as adept as Proudhon in mastering the nuances of Hegelian dialectics. In order to make any sense out of Voyer's conceptual melange, it is necessary to understand the crude plan which underlies his text: Voyer's jejune exposition of the basic structures of experience moves from one centering theme to the next, progressing from "appearance" to "work" to "exchange," and finally arriving at the integral concept of his introduction, which is, of course, "publicity." Voyer's sequence can be challenged both on the basis of how he makes connections between its individual points and in terms of the errors within his presentation of each theme. Although Voyer attaches great importance to the "Idea," it is remarkable how he falsifies and misinterprets the ideas which he appropriates from other sources. The system which Voyer pretends to have arrived at is flawed from the outset, that is, with Voyer's reading of Hegel. Voyer's mechanistic interpretation of the "dialectic of negativity" contained in Hegel's *Science of Logic* leads him to posit reality as "the unity of that which exists and the appearance of that which exists." As a poor pupil of philosophy, Voyer views the realm of appearance — because it is there that the inner content of the object is immediately expressed — as containing the final truth

of the object, in this case, being. But in limiting the Hegelian dialectic merely to the relation between the categories of appearance and being, he conveniently ignores Hegel's own statement that "beyond and above mere appearance comes in the first place Actuality, the third grade of Essence . . ." (*Science of Logic*) It is precisely the dialectical relation between appearance and actuality which is lost by Voyer, who compounds his misinterpretation of Hegel by asserting that Hegel's discussion of the labor process is restricted to intellectual labor ("The only work which Hegel knows and recognizes is intellectual work, abstract work"), and in so doing ignores the crucial passage in the *Phenomenology* where Hegel analyzes labor in its concrete form. But such problems of interpretation are not restricted to Voyer's analysis of Hegel; many of his theses consist of verbatim excerpts from the works of Marx and others, in which he makes certain crucial substitutions which deform the content of the original texts. In his free appropriation of passages from the *German Ideology* and the *Paris Manuscripts*, he replaces all references to "production" with "exchange." Such a "correction" of Marx is obviously not accidental, but serves a definite purpose: exchange, rather than production, appears as a primordial category which is eminently suited to Voyer's dehistoricized conceptual universe. Voyer only reencounters Marx in a Feuerbachian period, speaking unabashedly of "humanity" and "human essence." His lack of historical sensibilities elsewhere is demonstrated in his idealization of primitive societies: "One can only be filled with respect for the knowledge of these savages, who know that work becomes human when it is suppressed, that human work is suppressed work, and that publicity is the only work that is worthy of man." In Voyer, the cunning of reason appears as mere duplicity.

Voyer's essential failure, however, does not derive from this or that text or idea, but from his entire critical approach, namely, his underdeveloped methodology: he cannot distinguish within or between his various themes and thus can only relate them to each other. Thus, the reader is successively informed that "exchange is the manifestation of appearance, manifest and manifested appearance," "exchange has publicity as its foundation, in other words, the exchange of all with all," and "appearance is the foundation, the *raison d'être*, of publicity. Publicity is the passion of appearance for itself." Aside from being a mere tautology, this series of statements equates a mode of practice with a mode of presentation, as if they were equivalent categories. In his most "unique" contribution, the theory of publicity, Voyer's confusion becomes rampant: "publicity" incorporates both the act of objectifying social appearances (publicization) and these appearances themselves. It is everything on a general level and nothing in particular, being interchangeable with (among others) the acquisition of social identity in advanced capitalism, advertising, and even capital itself. With such a vapid concept, Voyer can explain the motive for purchasing commodities as a manifestation of distorted desire and the emergence of revolutionary consciousness as the realization of the "authentic" desire for publicity. In Voyer's text, all the negative aspects of the theory of the spectacle find their summation; it is a continuation of situationist theory which only preserves its contradictions.

14. Robert Cooperstein. *The Reproduction of Human Capital* (available from P.O. Box 950, Berkeley, California 94701). This text represents a mechanistic application of general "situationist" theory to a specific subject and exemplifies the kind of reductionist approach common to the Knabbist tendency as a whole. Cooperstein's primitive analysis of the nature of the family in advanced capitalism — and specifically, of the child's "alienation" in that institution — is noteworthy only in that the author fails to achieve the quite modest objectives which he sets himself. Precisely because the "scope and method" which inform Cooperstein's criticism are respectively so narrow and so simplistic, his "notes" are insufficient even as a rudimentary critique of the modern family. A certain lack of theoretical sophistication is evidenced throughout Cooperstein's text, as he successively:

isolates the family from the general context of social integration in advanced capitalism and thereby misrepresents the character of the contemporary socialization process, exaggerating the importance of the family as mediating agent while neglecting the role played by the surrogate parental authorities provided by the media and the educational system; fails to adequately confront the decisive shift in the role of the capitalist family in the modern era, as the primary economic function of the family becomes less one of organizing production than that of organizing consumption; and ignores the profound structural modification of the nuclear family in advanced capitalism, a consequence of a significant change in the role and value structures of larger society. But even if the limitations of Cooperstein's microcosmic approach are granted, he still proves to be a poor sociologist of family life. Curiously, he does not address such issues as infantile sexuality, adolescent "identity" crises, the reciprocal alienation of parent towards child, and the reinforcement of socially-defined sex roles in the family; for all his emphasis on the revolt of children, nowhere in his text is there any consideration of how such "revolt" is already expressed in contemporary family life. Ultimately, Cooperstein's analysis only becomes "original" in terms of his sophomoric excursion into the realm of philosophy ("An infant does not . . . differentiate himself from the totality; he is all and all is he, he is *the* subject-object of his existence."), his overblown imagery ("the Dracula effect"), and his numerous malapropisms: "ontogeny of value" (is value an organism?), "value deformation" (is there an original *value* which is perverted by capitalism?), "subjective capital." Aside from such idiosyncratic qualities, Cooperstein's text only shows to what mundane uses Voyer's Reich can be put.

15. Isaac Cronin. *San Francisco Chronicle* (available from P.O. Box 14221, San Francisco, California 94114). This wall poster derives from two sources of inspiration: the recent availability in English of Walter Benjamin's work on Baudelaire and the experiments of the S.I. in the field of "psycho-geography" from which the situationist theory of modern urbanism emerged. Cronin here publicizes his intimacy with such "new" ideas by producing a critique of a particular urban environment in which subjective criticism in the classic situationist style and crude objective analysis are to be found in equal proportions. Displaying a curious sense of historical development, Cronin laments the sudden passing of the traditional city and its "adventurous" possibilities and makes the astonishing observation that "the city is less and less a place where one wanders, explores, is surprised. It is more and more the locale of rigidly fixed itineraries where one acts in a prescribed manner with prescribed people." Not content with merely chronicling the alienation peculiar to the modern metropolis, Cronin provides a suitably comprehensive explanation for the existence of such a sorry state of affairs, an explanation which follows a curious line of reasoning, that of pure contradistinction, where something is simply because it isn't something else. Thus, we learn that "a good deal of our behavior is destined to be passive or, at best, reactive, because it does not participate in the creation of the (urban environment)," and elsewhere, "since *nothing practical* is at stake, (aesthetic judgements about the city) end up contributing to the general restlessness and superficiality." In his description of the "state of depravation (*sic*)" that exists within the "city as a spectacle-in-itself," Cronin offers the following circuitous, and ludicrous, argument: "the desire to sensuously experience the material consequences of productive activity encourages the city worker to contemplate everything from handicrafts to skyscrapers." In spite of this, Cronin displays an admirable command of the method of *dérive*: his prose drifts across the terrain of his analysis. In a real sense, Cronin is a radical complement to the modern "*flâneur*" he criticizes; as a marginal commentator, he views the urban routine from the outside even as he wanders across the space in which it is enacted. While attempting to join a critique of social space to a critique of social relations, he succeeds only in separating the two, perceiving the city not as an integrated social

environment, but as being composed of physical settings and subjective representations of diffuse ambiances. The city is thus seen as a mere container of social relations and not as a social form in which social relationships are the "essential subjective determinant." At best, Cronin can only elaborate the *mise-en-scène*, but not the action itself. It is thus perfectly in character that he pulls the "revolutionary situation" out of the abstract hat of affective estrangement from the decor of the city. He ignores the real social contradictions of the urban environment—authority relations, economic disparities, etc. — and even fails to confront the real "quality of life" in the city on a concrete level. As a consequence, he is unable to recognize the real urban crisis: the decomposition of the inner city and the present fiscal crisis of the metropolitan state. Instead, he prefers to see the city as a perfected modernistic element which is capable of infinitely reforming itself.

16. Shutes not only goes out to do battle with the pro-situ; he also declares war on normal syntax.

17. Among other things, the most recent publication of the *Centre de Recherche sur la Question Sociale* (B.P. 218, 75865 Paris CEDEX 18, France), *Chronique des secrets publics*, includes Denevert's response to Point-Blank's *La Mise Misérable*. While such a response was neither unexpected nor unjustified, given the errors of our original text, Denevert's anti-critique serves only to expose, not us, but himself and the weakness of his "theoretical" positions. The essential error of *La Mise Misérable* can be attributed to our infantile situationist perspective; we failed to recognize the problem which Denevert, from confused and mystified bases, attempted to confront, namely, the historical and theoretical failure of the S.I. Although we succeeded in exposing numerous stupidities and insufficiencies in Denevert's text, we only poked holes in his perspective rather than refuting it on a comprehensive level: we attacked Denevert from an anterior rather than superior position. In view of this, it is all the more surprising that Denevert, in his reply to our critique, fails to demolish the basis of our criticism of him and resorts instead to a superficial and haphazard rejoinder to our text. It is interesting to note the disingenuous manner in which Denevert commences his counter-attack; in order to conceal the fact that he is engaging in a polemic, he begins with an extensive discursion on the subject of polemical style and its archaic aspect in the context of contemporary criticism. In the course of this digression, Denevert makes the curious statement that "it is a definite advantage that revolutionary theory has over the styles which it inevitably supports at certain periods: by definition, styles exhaust themselves with time, whereas the viewpoint of revolutionary theory conserves all its fundamental points." In a series of disconnected ripostes, Denevert then proceeds to answer our criticisms: using the very style he so rightly depreciates, he proceeds to take several of our statements out of context and provides a new, quite gratuitous, emphasis to our remarks. We appear as hyper-paranoiacs, in mortal fear of Daniel Denevert: thus, he states that Point-Blank had considered his text to be a "direct threat to the viewpoint it defends." Denevert thus displays an inverted megalomania in which, through the terror of him which he imputes to us, he attaches enormous significance to *La Mise . . .* and to himself personally. Our principal error, however, was not that we overestimated Denevert's text, but that we failed to take it seriously enough, viewing it as a minor irritant; too often, defamatory remarks were used instead of analysis, and Denevert's rancor at these insults is understandable. However, it is peculiar that Denevert should look askance at our seeming audacity in daring to print a text in France; such is his Francocentrism that he accuses us of impertinently trying to "teach revolutionaries in France a lesson."

The other articles contained within the CRQS's publication show that they have apparently defaulted on the task of developing revolutionary perspectives which are commensurate with contemporary historical realities. Instead, they remain entirely

dependent on the most orthodox situationist theses for their own theoretical program. Their *Notes for a Situationist Manifesto* only enumerate a series of platitudes in which the good theorists of the CRQS inform the reader that: "the assault of the proletariat which has rediscovered little by little the necessity of a revolution and has defined in its struggles the conditions and stakes of a 'new era' has qualitatively confirmed itself and made itself more precise." Given such auspicious beginnings, one may expect much from their promised *Manifesto* — a project which they have taken from the vault of the unrealized endeavors of the S.I. The only other "significant" theoretical work in this publication consists of several extracts from Denevert's unpublished book *Situationist Theory and the Process of Separation*, written between 1972 and 1973. These selections represent the origins of the CRQS's perspectives, preserving situationist theory in the wake of the S.I.'s collapse. In this work, Denevert recognizes the final and decisive impasse of the S.I., and, as if it were not already self-evident, exposes Debord and Sanguinetti's preposterous charade in attempting to continue the S.I. But Denevert can only evaluate the demise of the S.I. by means of its own criteria. His inter-marginal commentaries on *61 Theses* . . . represent only an internal criticism of the S.I., a critique which fails to establish the real historical context of the defeat of the S.I. and in which the S.I. appears as if it had merely failed itself. Denevert views the essential shortcoming of the S.I. to have been its inability to realize an effectively egalitarian practice against the hierarchy of the spectacle. According to Denevert, the S.I.'s promotion of an illusory internal democracy led to its reintegration into the "process of separation." Although Denevert cites certain deficiencies in the S.I., he can only reproach it for ceasing to be a model of radical social relations; in no way does he dispute the essential premises of the situationist project. The remaining excerpts are chiefly a collection of truisms on the pro-situ, on theory, and on ideology and "separate thought."

The essential secret which the CRQS make public in their *Chronique* is that of their glamorously "radical" daily lives. In choosing to make such a disclosure, they implicitly present themselves as a Center in more ways than one: specifically, as an experimental laboratory for the realization of "non-hierarchical relations." Through this *de facto* cultural avant-gardism, the CRQS appears as daring, as prepared to risk everything in the passionate realization of "practical theory"; they present their own daily lives as if they had already achieved a new way of living, and the self-indulgent style in which they do so is indicative of a certain dandyism. This immediate assault on daily life is as primitive as it is marginal in terms of its social origins, and the intrigues and "adventures" which they deem worthy of public attention have all the significance of a situationist *Courrière du Coeur. Critique ad Mulierem*, Jeanne Charles's abysmal article on women (which restricts its discussion to situationist women, of course), is only noteworthy in that her statement "For theory is the critique of daily life; it is the operation of each individual that he carries out in this daily life; it is a series of renewed and corrected *interventions* on relations with people (which are also alienation's place of *efficacy*) and, which comes to the same thing, it is also a series of interventions in society. Theory is an undertaking of *revolutionary transformation* which implies that the individual theorist accept his own uninterrupted transformation. Theory is thus founded on the comprehension of and action on blocks (individual and socio-historical)" is evident of a tendency in both Denevert and Knabb's criticism. This tendency seems to posit the existence of a radical subject (whether that of the individual or of the revolutionary movement as a whole), whose development is only impaired by various constraints. The existence of this subject itself is never questioned; it remains a fundamental *datum*.

18. Their *Notice*, for all its attempts to appear contemporary, is merely a regurgitation of past situationist theses which is closely modeled on Denevert's *Déclaration* . . . , itself based formally and stylistically on the *Lignes Générales* published a year earlier by the French group *Errata*.

19. An example of this is our pamphlet about Detroit auto workers' wildcats, *End of the Line*, which was written for a situation we knew very little about, outside of newspaper reports. Once distributed, this pamphlet was never followed up with anything else, as if *End of the Line* had said all there was to say about the problems posed by the Detroit strikes.

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