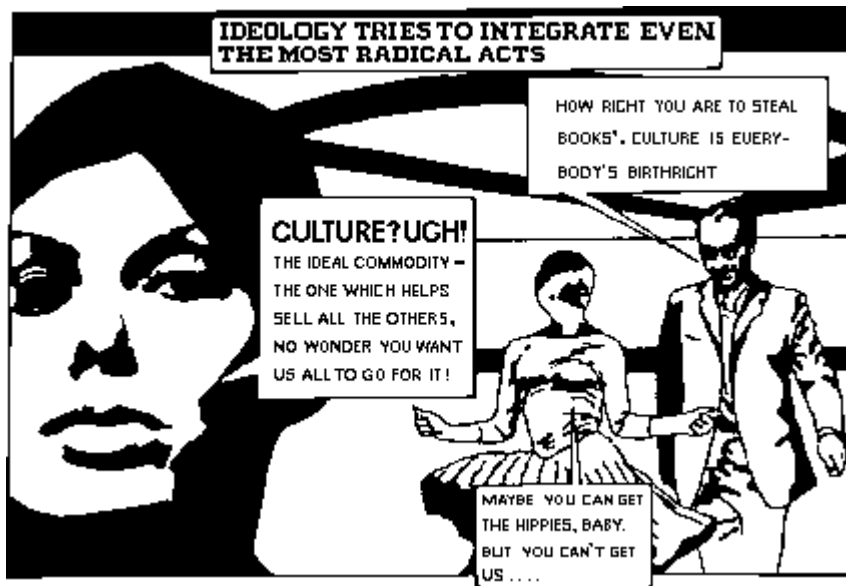


# Situationists - an introduction



A short introduction to the ideas of the Situationists. Based in France, their strand of libertarian Marxism became popular after the [mass strikes of 1968](#).

Situationist ideas came from the European organisation the Situationist International, formed in 1957. While it lasted only 15 years, its ideas were deeply influential, and have been a part of Western society - and radical movements - ever since.

Resisting any attempts to file their ideas into a static ideology, situationism, the SI called attention to the priority of real life, real live activity, which continually experiments and corrects itself, instead of just constantly reiterating a few supposedly eternal truths like the ideologies of [Trotskyism](#), [Leninism](#), [Maoism](#) or even [anarchism](#). Static ideologies, however true they may be, tend, like everything else in capitalist society, to rigidify and become fetishised, just one more thing to passively consume.

Partly as a result of this, Situationist ideas are notoriously difficult to explain, and open to a wide degree of interpretation. However, a few facts can be stated. Most introductions to the Situationists focus on their cultural ideas, particularly in relation to detournement (subverting elements of popular culture) and the development of punk, but the roots of Situationist ideas are in [Marxism](#). Libertarian Marxism, closer to anarchism than authoritarian strands of [traditional Marxism](#), with the central idea that workers are systematically exploited in capitalism and that they should organise and take control of the means of production and organise society on the basis of democratic [workers' councils](#).

The Situationists, or Situs, were the first revolutionary group to analyse capitalism in its current consumerist form. Then as now, in the West most workers were not desperately poor, toiling 12 hours a day in factories and mines (workers' struggles over the previous 150 years saw to that) but the poverty of everyday life had never been greater. Workers were not beaten down with savage repression, so much as with illusions in empty consumer goods, or spectacles, which were imbued by culture and marketing with characteristics they don't really possess. For example, that purchasing this or that gadget or brand of shoes will make your life complete, or make your sad life like that of the celebrities and models culture shows us.

The Situs argued that increased material wealth of workers was not enough to stop class struggle and ensure capitalism's perpetual existence, as many on the left argued at the time,

since authentic human desires would be always in conflict with alienating capitalist society. Situationist tactics included attempting to create “situations” where humans would interact together as people, not mediated by commodities. They saw in moments of true community the possibility of a future, joyful and un-alienated society.

*"People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have corpses in their mouths." [1](#)*

In a (anti-)spectacular demonstration of the validity of their ideas, a group of Situationists, along with anarchists, at the Nanterre University were instrumental in sparking the [Revolt of May 1968](#) which swept the country, bringing it to a state of near-revolution, with 10 million workers on General Strike, many of them occupying their workplaces.

The key figure in the SI, [Guy Debord](#), committed suicide in 1994 but Situationist ideas live on, having been made a fundamental part of most anarchist theory today, as well as their thoughts on consumerism which are now held as truisms by most people.

*"We have a world of pleasure to win, and nothing to lose but boredom." [2](#)*

## More information

- [Society of the Spectacle - Guy Debord](#) - arguably the most important text of situationist ideas.
- [The revolution of everyday life - Raoul Vaneigem](#) - classic book outlining the alienation of everyday life under capitalism, both at work and outside of it.
- [On the poverty of student life](#) - legendary essay by situationist students at the University of Strasbourg.
- [Internationale Situationiste](#) - journal of the Situationist International.
- [How to talk like a Situationist](#) - humorous piss-take of situationist stereotypes.
  - [1.](#) The Revolution of Everyday Life - Raoul Vaneigem
  - [2.](#) *ibid.*