

Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview

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In the introduction to a recent anthology of Henri Lefebvre's writings on the city, the editors of the volume comment that the relationship between Lefebvrian and Situationist concepts awaits a serious study.¹ What follows is less a serious study than an at-times-playful conversation in which Henri Lefebvre recalls his relationship with Guy Debord and the Situationist International. The interview, if it may be called that, took place in 1983 at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where Lefebvre, on the invitation of Fredric Jameson, was a visiting scholar in residence. I had then just begun my own reading of Lefebvre and the Situationists, research that would result in a book on Rimbaud and an issue of *Yale French Studies* coedited with Alice Kaplan on "everyday life."² From the outset of the conversation it was evident that Lefebvre, then in his eighties, had very clear ideas of the directions he wanted to pursue.

H.L. Are you going to ask me questions about the Situationists? Because I have something I'd like to talk about.

K.R. Fine, go ahead.

H.L. The Situationists . . . it's a delicate subject, one I care deeply about. It touches me in some ways very intimately because I knew them very well. I was close friends with them. The friendship lasted from 1957 to 1961 or '62, which is to say about five years. And then we had a quarrel that got worse and worse in conditions I don't understand too well myself but which I could describe to you. In the end it was a love story that ended badly, very badly. There are love stories that begin well and end badly. And this was one of them.

I remember a whole night spent talking at Guy Debord's place where he was living with Michèle Bernstein in a kind of studio near the place I was

1. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Kebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 13.

2. *Yale French Studies* 73, special issue on "Everyday Life" (1987), ed. Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross.

living on the rue Saint Martin, in a dark room, no lights at all, a veritable . . . a miserable place, but at the same time a place where there was a great deal of strength and radiance in the thinking and the research.

K.R. They had no money?

H.L. No . . .

K.R. How did they live?

H.L. No one could figure out how they got by. One day one of my friends (someone to whom I had introduced Debord) asked him, "What do you live on?" And Guy Debord answered very proudly, "I live off my wits" [*je vie d'expédients*]. [Laughter] Actually, he must have had some money; I think that his family wasn't poor. His parents lived on the Côte d'Azur. I don't think I really know the answer. And also Michèle Bernstein had come up with a very clever way to make money, or at least a bit of money. Or at least this is what she told me. She said that she did horoscopes for horses, which were published in racing magazines. It was extremely funny. She determined the date of birth of the horses and did their horoscope in order to predict the outcome of the race. And I think there were racing magazines that published them and paid her.

K.R. So the Situationist slogan "Never work" didn't apply to women?

H.L. Yes it did, because this wasn't work. They didn't work; they managed to live without working to quite a large extent—of course, they had to do something. To do horoscopes for race horses, I suppose, wasn't really work; in any case I think it was fun to do it, and they didn't really work.

But I'd like to go farther back in time, because everything started much earlier. It started with the CoBrA group. They were the intermediaries: the group made up of architects, with Constant in particular (the architect from Amsterdam), and Asger Jorn (the painter), and people from Brussels—it was a Nordic group, a group with considerable ambitions. They wanted to renew art, renew the action of art on life. It was an extremely interesting and active group, which came together in the 1950s, and one of the books that inspired the founding of the group was my book *Critique de la vie quotidienne*.³ That's why I got involved with them from such an early date. And the pivotal figure was Constant Nieuwenhuys, the utopian architect who designed a Utopian city, New Babylon—a provocative name, since in the Protestant tradition Babylon is a figure of evil. New Babylon was to be the figure of good which took the name of the cursed city and transformed itself into the city of the future. The design for New Babylon dates from 1950. And in 1953 Constant published a text called *For an Architecture of Situation*. This was a fundamental text based on the idea that architecture would allow a transformation of daily reality. This was the connection with *Critique de la vie*

3. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, 3 vols. (Paris: L'Arche, 1947–81); English translation of volume 1, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991).

quotidienne: to create an architecture that would itself instigate the creation of new situations. So this text was the beginning of a whole new research that developed in the following years, especially since Constant was very close to popular movements; he was one of the instigators of the Provos, the Provo movement.

K.R. So there was a direct relationship between Constant and the Provos?

H.L. Oh yes, he was recognized by them as their thinker, their leader, the one who wanted to transform life and the city. The relation was direct; he spurred them on.

It's important to understand the periodization of the times. Politically, 1956 was an important year because of the end of Stalinism. There was Khrushchev's famous report to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in the USSR, where he demolished the figure of Stalin—a report that was much discussed, argued about. In France people claimed that it was false, that it had been invented by the American secret service. In fact it was entirely the work of the one who succeeded Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev—and who demolished the figure of his predecessor. We have to keep the periodization in mind. During the postwar years, the figure of Stalin was dominant. And the Communist movement was *the* revolutionary movement. Then, after '56 or '57, revolutionary movements moved outside the organized parties, especially with Fidel Castro. In this sense, Situationism wasn't at all isolated. Its point of origin was Holland, Paris too, but Holland especially, and it was linked to many events on the world scale, especially the fact that Fidel Castro succeeded in a revolutionary victory completely outside of the Communist movement and the workers' movement. This was an event. And I remember that in 1957 I published a kind of manifesto, *Le romantisme révolutionnaire*, which was linked to the Castro story and to all the movements happening a little bit everywhere that were outside of the parties. This was when I left the Communist Party myself. I felt that there were going to be a lot of things happening outside the established parties and organized movements like syndicates.

There was going to be a spontaneity outside of organizations and institutions—that's what this text from 1957 was about. It was this text that put me into contact with the Situationists, because they attached a certain importance to it—before attacking it later on. They had their critiques to make, of course; we were never completely in agreement, but the article was the basis for a certain understanding that lasted for four or five years—we kept coming back to it.

K.R. And at this point you were working on the second volume of the *Critique de la vie quotidienne*?

H.L. Yes, and also on a book about the Paris Commune.

K.R. You were working on both at once?

H.L. Yes, at the same time, in a state of confusion. It was the moment when I left the Party, the moment of the Algerian War. There was a lot going on . . . I was almost fired. I went before commissions for having . . . I wasn't in the university, I was a research director at the CNRS, and I was almost dismissed for having signed manifestos for the Algerians and for having offered support—a feeble support, of course—to the Algerian cause. It was a moment of intense fermentation. But in France support for the Algerians didn't happen through the Party, nor through the official organizations within the Party or through the syndicates; it went on outside the institutions. The Communist Party only supported the Algerians grudgingly, in appearance only. In fact, they hardly helped them at all, and afterward the Algerians were very angry with the Party. An oppositional group within the Party, and also the movement outside of the Party—these were the only ones that supported the Algerians, and that played a role in this story, since we have to situate it within the context of the times and the political context.

And then there were the rather extremist movements like that of Isidore Isou and the Lettrists. They also had ambitions on an international scale. But that was all a joke. It was evident in the way that Isidore Isou would recite his Dadaist poetry made up of meaningless syllables and fragments of words. He would recite it in cafés. I remember very well having met him several times in Paris.

But even that showed a certain fermentation in French life, which was crystallized in the return of de Gaulle to power in 1958. The Communist Party showed a deep incapacity by not understanding Stalinism, by doing nothing for the Algerians, and by opposing de Gaulle's return to power very ineffectively, limiting itself to calling de Gaulle a fascist, which wasn't exactly the case. De Gaulle wanted to bring order to the Algerian question. He was the only one who could; we realized that later on. But, throughout, the period was one of a great fermentation, comparable to 1936.

K.R. Did the Situationist theory of constructing situations have a direct relationship with your theory of “moments”?

H.L. Yes, that was the basis of our understanding. They more or less said to me during discussions—discussions that lasted whole nights—“What you call ‘moments,’ we call ‘situations,’ but we're taking it farther than you. You accept as ‘moments’ everything that has occurred in the course of history: love, poetry, thought. We want to create new moments.”

K.R. How did they propose to make the transition from a “moment” to a conscious construction?

H.L. The idea of a new moment, of a new situation, was already there in Constant's text from 1953: *Pour une architecture de situation*. Because the architecture of situation is a Utopian architecture that supposes a new society, Constant's idea was that society must be transformed not in order to continue

a boring, uneventful life, but in order to create something absolutely new: situations.

K.R. And how did the city figure into this?

H.L. Well, “new situations” was never very clear. When we talked about it, I always gave as an example—and they would have nothing to do with my example—love. I said to them: in antiquity passionate love was known, but not individual love, love for an individual. The poets of antiquity write of a kind of cosmic, physical, physiological passion. But love for an individual only appears in the Middle Ages within a mixture of Islamic and Christian traditions, especially in the south of France. Individual love is Dante’s love for Beatrice: *la vita nuova*, new life. It’s the love between Tristan and Yseult, tragic love—courtly love in the south of France. Where I come from near Navarrenx, there is the tower of Prince Gaston Phébus, who was the first prince-troubadour to sing songs about individual love: “When I sing, I do not sing for me, but I sing for my friend who is close to me.” This is already individual love, the tragedy of individual love which endures throughout the centuries, in *La Princesse de Cleves*, in novels, theaters, in Racine’s *Bérénice*, through all of literature.

K.R. But didn’t constructing “new situations” for the Situationists involve urbanism?

H.L. Yes. We agreed. I said to them, individual love created new situations; there was a creation of situations. But it didn’t happen in a day, it developed. Their idea (and this was also related to Constant’s experiments) was that in the city one could create new situations by, for example, linking up parts of the city, neighborhoods that were separated spatially. And that was the first meaning of the *dérive*. It was done first in Amsterdam, using walkie-talkies. There was one group that went to one part of the city and could communicate with people in another area.

K.R. Did the Situationists use this technique, too?

H.L. Oh, I think so. In any case, Constant did. But there were Situationist experiments in Unitary Urbanism. Unitary Urbanism consisted of making different parts of the city communicate with one another. They did their experiments; I didn’t participate. They used all kinds of means of communication—I don’t know when exactly they were using walkie-talkies. But I know they were used in Amsterdam and in Strasbourg.

K.R. Did you know people in Strasbourg then?

H.L. They were my students. But relations with them were also very strained. When I arrived in Strasbourg in 1958 or ’59, it was right in the middle of the Algerian War, and I had only been in Strasbourg for about three weeks, maybe, when a group of guys came up to me. They were the future Situationists of Strasbourg—or maybe they were already a little bit Situationist. They said to me: “We need your support, we’re going to set up a *maquis* in the Vosges. We’re going to make a military base in the Vosges, and from there spread out over the whole country. We’re going to derail trains.” I replied:

“But the army and the police . . . you aren’t sure of having the support of the population. You’re precipitating a catastrophe.” So they began to insult me and call me a traitor. And after a little while, a few weeks, they came back to see me and told me: “You were right, it’s impossible. It’s impossible to set up a military base in the Vosges. We’re going to work on something else.”

So I found myself getting along with them, and afterward they became Situationists, the same group that wanted to support the Algerians by starting up military activity in France—it was crazy. But, you know, my relations with them were always very difficult. They got angry over nothing. I was living at the time with a young woman from Strasbourg; I was the scandal of the university. She was pregnant, she had a daughter (my daughter Armelle), and it was the town scandal—a horror, an abomination. Strasbourg was a very bourgeois city. And the university wasn’t outside the city, it was right in the middle. But at the same time I was giving lectures that were very successful, on music, for example—music and society. I taught a whole course one year on “music and society”; many people attended, so I could only be attacked with difficulty. Armelle’s mother, Nicole, was friends with the Situationists. She was always with them; she invited them over. They came to eat at our place, and we played music—this was scandal in Strasbourg. So that’s how I came to have close relations, organic relations, with them—not only because I taught Marxism at the University, but through Nicole, who was an intermediary. Guy came to my place to see Nicole, to eat dinner. But relations were difficult, they got angry over tiny things. Mustapha Khayati, author of the brochure, was in the group.

K.R. What was the effect of the brochure [*De la misère en milieu étudiant*]?⁴ How many copies were given out?

H.L. Oh, it was very successful. But in the beginning it was only distributed in Strasbourg; then, Debord and others distributed it in Paris. Thousands and thousands were given out, certainly tens of thousands of copies to students. It’s a very good brochure, without a doubt. Its author, Mustapha Khayati, was Tunisian. There were several Tunisians in the group, many foreigners who were less talked about afterward, and even Mustapha Khayati didn’t show himself very often at the time because he might have had problems because of his nationality. He didn’t have dual citizenship; he stayed a Tunisian and he could have had real troubles. But anyway, in Paris, after 1957, I saw a lot of them, and I was also spending time with Constant in Amsterdam. This was

4. L’Internationale situationniste, *De la misère en milieu étudiant considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier* (1966; Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1976). An English translation appears in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981).

the moment when the Provo movement became very powerful in Amsterdam, with their idea of keeping urban life intact, preventing the city from being eviscerated by autoroutes and being opened up to automobile traffic. They wanted the city to be conserved and transformed instead of being given over to traffic. They also wanted drugs; they seemed to count on drugs to create new situations—imagination sparked by LSD. It was LSD in those days.

K.R. Among the Parisian Situationists too?

H.L. No. Very little. They drank. At Guy Debord's place we drank tequila with a little mezcal added. But never . . . mescaline, a little, but many of them took nothing at all. That wasn't the way they wanted to create new situations.

K.R. To return to Unitary Urbanism, this way of linking *quartiers* together without creating homogeneity. Each *quartier* retained its distinct aspects, right?

H.L. Yes, they didn't merge together; they're already a whole, but a whole that is in some sense fragmented and is only in a virtual state. The idea is to make of the city a whole, but a whole in movement, a whole in transformation.

The plans for New Babylon were given to the National Museum in La Haye. They were in Constant's studio, which was in a half-demolished brick building. The most striking thing I remember about Constant's studio was what was in an immense cage: an iguana.

K.R. Now, *there's* a new situation.

H.L. He lived on intimate terms with an iguana.

K.R. Was Constant's project predicated on the end of work?

H.L. Yes, to a certain extent. Yes, that's the beginning: complete mechanization, the complete automatization of productive work, which left people free to do other things. He was one of the ones who considered the problem.

K.R. And the Situationists too?

H.L. Yes.

K.R. Do you also situate your work in that lineage? From Lafargue to . . . ?

H.L. Yes, but not from Lafargue. I think my starting point was a science-fiction novel called *City*. It's an American novel by [Clifford] Simak in which work is performed by robots. Humans can't stand the situation; they die because they are so used to working. They die, and the dogs that are left take advantage of the situation. The robots work for them, feed them, and so forth. And the dogs are perfectly happy because they aren't deformed by the work habit. I remember the role played by this novel in our discussions. I don't remember when it came out in the United States, but I think it's one of the first science-fiction novels that was acclaimed and had influence, but it was maybe only in those years. In any case, that was Constant's starting point: a society liberated from work. And it was in the orientation of Lafargue's *Droit à la paresse*, but renewed by the perspective of automation which began in those years.

And so, a complete change in revolutionary movements beginning in

1956–57, movements that leave behind classic organizations. What's beautiful is the voice of small groups having influence . . .

K.R. So the very existence of microsocieties or groupuscules like the Situationists was itself a new situation?

H.L. Yes, to a certain extent. But then again, we musn't exaggerate either. For how many of them were there? You know that the Situationist International never had more than ten members. There were two or three Belgians, two or three Dutch, like Constant. But they were all expelled immediately. Guy Debord followed André Breton's example. People were expelled. I was never a part of the group. I could have been, but I was careful, since I knew Guy Debord's character and his manner, and the way he had of imitating André Breton, by expelling everyone in order to get at a pure and hard little core. In the end the members of the Situationist International were Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, and Michèle Bernstein. There were some outer groupuscules, satellite groups, where I was, and where Asger Jorn was too. Asger Jorn had been expelled; poor Constant was expelled as well. For what reason? Well, Constant didn't build anything, he never built anything—he was an architect who didn't build, a Utopian architect. But he was expelled because a guy who worked with him built a church, in Germany: expulsion for reason of disastrous influence. It's rubbish. It was really about keeping oneself in a pure state, like a crystal. Debord's dogmatism was exactly like Breton's. And, what's more, it was a dogmatism without a dogma, since the theory of situations, of the creation of situations, disappeared very quickly, leaving behind only the critique of the existing world, which is where it all started, with the *Critique de la vie quotidienne*.

K.R. How did your association with the Situationists change or inspire your thinking about the city? Did it change your thinking or not?

H.L. It was all corollary, parallel. My thinking about the city had completely different sources. Where I come from—an agricultural region—I had been studying agricultural questions for a long time. One bright day, in my region, bulldozers arrived and started leveling the trees—they had discovered oil there. There are oil wells in my region, not very many, but still a significant number; one of the biggest refineries in Europe was at Mourenx, Lacq-Mourenx.

So then I saw a new city being built where before there were only fields and oak forests. This began in 1953–54. Little by little I left the agricultural questions behind, saying to myself, now here's something new, something important. I didn't expect the very brutal urbanization that followed. That new city was called Lacq-Mourenx, "ville nouvelle." Since I was at the CNRS, I sent some people there right away to watch the development. I even wanted to write a book—which I never did, like so many projects—entitled *Birth of a City*. That was the starting point. But at the

same time I met Guy Debord, I met Constant, I knew that the Provos in Amsterdam were interested in the city, and I went there to see what was going on, maybe ten times. Just to see the form that the movement was taking, if it took a political form. There were Provos elected to the city council in Amsterdam. I forget which year, but they pulled off a big victory in the municipal elections. Then after that, it all fell apart. All this was part and parcel of the same thing. And after 1960 there was the great movement in urbanization. They abandoned the theory of Unitary Urbanism, since Unitary Urbanism only had a precise meaning for historic cities like Amsterdam that had to be renewed, transformed. But from the moment that the historic city exploded into peripheries, suburbs—like what happened in Paris, and in all sorts of places, Los Angeles, San Francisco, wild extensions of the city—the theory of Unitary Urbanism lost any meaning. I remember very sharp, pointed discussions with Guy Debord, when he said that urbanism was becoming an ideology. He was absolutely right, from the moment that there was an official doctrine on urbanism. I think the urbanism code dates from 1961 in France—that's the moment when urbanism becomes an ideology. That doesn't mean that the problem of the city was resolved—far from it. But at that point they abandoned the theory of Unitary Urbanism. And then I think that even the *dérive*, the *dérive* experiments were little by little abandoned around then too. I'm not sure how that happened, because that was the moment I broke with them.

After all, there's the political context in France, and there are also personal relations, very complicated stories. The most complicated story arose when they came to my place in the Pyrenees. And we took a wonderful trip: we left Paris in a car and stopped at the Lascaux caves, which were closed not long after that. We were very taken up with the problem of the Lascaux caves. They are buried very deep, with even a well that was inaccessible—and all this filled with paintings. How were these paintings made, who were they made for, since they weren't painted in order to be seen? The idea was that painting started as a critique. All the more so in that all the churches in the region have crypts. We stopped at Saint-Savin, where there are frescoes on the church's vaulted dome and a crypt full of paintings, a crypt whose depths are difficult to reach because it is so dark. What are paintings that were not destined to be seen? And how were they made? So, we made our way south; we had a fabulous feast in Sarlat, and I could hardly drive—I was the one driving. I got a ticket; we were almost arrested because I crossed a village going 120 kilometers per hour. They stayed several days at my place, and working together, we wrote a programmatic text. At the end of the week they spent at Navarrenx, they kept the text. I said to them, "You type it" (it was handwritten), and afterward they accused me of plagiarism. In reality this was complete bad faith. The text that was

used in writing the book about the Commune was a joint text, by them and by me, and only one small part of the Commune book was taken from the joint text.

I had this idea about the Commune as a festival, and I threw it out into debate, after consulting an unpublished document about the Commune which is at the Feltrinelli Foundation in Milan. It's a diary about the Commune. The person who kept the diary, who was deported, by the way, and who brought back his diary from deportation several years later, around 1880, recounts how on March 28, 1871, Thiers's soldiers came to look for the cannons that were in Montmartre and on the hills of Belleville; how the women who got up very early in the morning heard the noise and all ran out in the streets and surrounded the soldiers, laughing, having fun, greeting them in a friendly way. Then they went off to get coffee and offered it to the soldiers, and these soldiers who had come to get the cannons were more or less carried away by the people. First the women, then the men, everyone came out, in an atmosphere of popular festival. The Commune cannon incident was not at all a situation of armed heroes arriving and combating the soldiers taking the cannons. It didn't happen at all like that. It was the people who came out of their houses, who were enjoying themselves. The weather was beautiful, March 28 was the first day of spring, it was sunny: the women kiss the soldiers, they're relaxed, and the soldiers are absorbed into all of that, a Parisian popular festival. But this diary is an exception. And afterward the theorists of the heroes of the Commune said to me, "This is a testimonial, you can't write history from a testimonial." The Situationists said more or less the same thing. I didn't read what they said; I did my work. There were ideas that were batted around in conversation, and then worked up in common texts. And then afterward, I wrote my study on the Commune. I worked for weeks in Milan, at the Feltrinelli Institute; I found unpublished documentation, I used it, and that's completely my right. Listen, I don't care at all about these accusations of plagiarism. And I never took the time to read what they wrote about it in their journal. I know that I was dragged through the dirt.

And then, as for how I broke with them, it happened after an extremely complicated story concerning the journal *Arguments*. The idea had come up to stop editing *Arguments* because several of the collaborators in the journal, such as my friend Kostas Axelos, thought that its role was over; they thought they had nothing more to say. In fact, I have the text by Axelos where he talks about the dissolution of the group and of the journal; they thought it was finished and that it would be better to end it rather than let it drag along. I was kept informed of these discussions. During discussions with Guy Debord, we talked about it and Debord said to me, "Our journal, the *Internationale situationniste*, has to replace *Arguments*." And so *Argument's* editor,

and all the people there, had to agree. Everything depended on a certain man [Herval]⁵ who was very powerful at the time in publishing; he did a literary chronicle for *L'Express*, he was also in with the *Nouvelle revue française* and the Editions de Minuit. He was extremely powerful, and everything depended on him.

Well, at that moment I had broken up with a woman—very bitterly. She left me, and she took my address book with her. This meant I no longer had Herval's address. I telephoned Debord and told him I was perfectly willing to continue negotiations with Herval, but that I no longer had his address, his phone number—nothing. Debord began insulting me over the phone. He was furious and said, "I'm used to people like you who become traitors at the decisive moment." That's how the rupture between us began, and it continued in a curious way.

This woman, Eveline—who, I forgot to mention, was a longtime friend of Michèle Bernstein—had left me, and Nicole took her place, and Nicole was pregnant. She wanted the child, and so did I: it's Armelle. But Guy Debord and our little Situationist friends sent a young woman to Navarrenx over Easter vacation one year to try to persuade Nicole to get an abortion.

K.R. Why?

H.L. Because they didn't know, or they didn't want to know, that Nicole wanted this child just as I did. Can you believe that this woman, whose name was Denise and who was particularly unbearable, had been sent to persuade Nicole to have an abortion and leave me, in order to be with them? Then I understood—Nicole told me about it right away. She told me, "You know, this woman is on a mission from Guy Debord; they want me to leave you and get rid of the kid." So since I already didn't much like Denise, I threw her out. Denise was the girlfriend of that Situationist who had learned chinese—I forget his name. I'm telling you this because it's all very complex, everything gets mixed up: political history, ideology, women . . . but there was a time when it was a real, very warm friendship.

K.R. You even wrote an article entitled "You Will All Be Situationists."

H.L. Oh yes, I did that to help bring about the replacement of *Arguments* by the *Internationale situationniste* . . . Guy Debord accused me of having done nothing to get it published. Yes, it was Herval who was supposed to publish it. Lucky for me that it didn't appear because afterwards they would have reproached me for it.

But there's a point I want to go back to—the question of plagiarism. That bothered me quite a bit. Not a lot, just a little bit. We worked together *day and night* at Navarrenx, we went to sleep at nine in the morning (that was

5. Name unclear on the tape.

how they lived, going to sleep in the morning and sleeping all day). We ate nothing. It was appalling. I suffered throughout the week, not eating, just drinking. We must have drunk a hundred bottles. In a few days. Five . . . and we were working while drinking. The text was almost a doctrinal résumé of everything we were thinking, about situations, about transformations of life; it wasn't very long, just a few pages, handwritten. They took it away and typed it up and afterwards thought they had a right to the ideas. These were ideas we tossed around on a little country walk I took them on—with a nice touch of perversity I took them down a path that led nowhere, that got lost in the woods, fields, and so on. Michèle Bernstein had a complete nervous breakdown, she didn't enjoy it at all. . . . It's true, it wasn't urban, it was very deep in the country.

K.R. A rural *dérive*. Let's talk a bit about the *dérive* in general. Do you think it brought anything new to spatial theory or to urban theory? In the way that it emphasized experimental games and practices, do you think it was more productive than a purely theoretical approach to the city?

H.L. Yes. As I perceived it, the *dérive* was more of a practice than a theory. It revealed the growing fragmentation of the city. In the course of its history the city was once a powerful organic unity; for some time, however, that unity was becoming undone, was fragmenting, and they were recording examples of what we all had been talking about, like the place where the new Bastille Opera is going to be built. The Place de la Bastille is the end of historic Paris—beyond that it's the Paris of the first industrialization of the nineteenth century. The Place des Vosges is still aristocratic Paris of the seventeenth century. When you get to the Bastille, another Paris begins, which is of the nineteenth century, but it's the Paris of the bourgeoisie, of commercial, industrial expansion, at the same time that the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie takes hold of the Marais, the center of Paris—it spreads out beyond the Bastille, the rue de la Roquette, the rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine, etc. So already the city is becoming fragmented. We had a vision of a city that was more and more fragmented without its organic unity being completely shattered. Afterward, of course, the peripheries and the suburbs highlighted the problem. But back then it wasn't yet obvious, and we thought that the practice of the *dérive* revealed the idea of the fragmented city. But it was mostly done in Amsterdam. The experiment consisted of rendering different aspects or fragments of the city simultaneous, fragments that can only be seen successively, in the same way that there exist people who have never seen certain parts of the city.

K.R. While the *dérive* took the form of a narrative.

H.L. That's it; one goes along in any direction and recounts what one sees.

K.R. But the recounting can't be done simultaneously.

H.L. Yes, it can, if you have a walkie-talkie; the goal was to attain a certain simultaneity. That was the goal—it didn't always work.

K.R. So, a kind of synchronic history.

H.L. Yes, that's it, a synchronic history. That was the meaning of Unitary Urbanism: unify what has a certain unity, but a lost unity, a disappearing unity.

K.R. And it was during the time when you knew the Situationists that the idea of Unitary Urbanism began to lose its force?

H.L. At the moment when urbanization became truly massive, that is, after 1960, and when the city, Paris, completely exploded. You know that there were very few suburbs in Paris; there were some, but very few. And then suddenly the whole area was filled, covered with little houses, with new cities, Sarcelles and the rest. Sarcelles became a kind of myth. There was even a disease that people called the "sarcellite." And around then Guy Debord's attitude changed—he went from Unitary Urbanism to the thesis of urbanistic ideology.

K.R. And what was that transition, exactly?

H.L. It was more than a transition, it was the abandonment of one position in order to adopt the exact opposite one. Between the idea of elaborating an urbanism and the thesis that all urbanism is an ideology is a profound modification. In fact, by saying that all urbanism was a bourgeois ideology, they abandoned the problem of the city. They left it behind. They thought that the problem no longer interested them. While I, on the other hand, continued to be interested; I thought that the explosion of the historic city was precisely the occasion for finding a larger theory of the city, and not a pretext for abandoning the problem. But it wasn't because of this that we fell out; we fell out for much more sordid reasons. That business about sabotaging *Arguments*, Herval's lost address—all that was completely ridiculous. But there were certainly deeper reasons.

The theory of situations was itself abandoned, little by little. And the journal itself became a political organ. They began to insult everyone. That was part of Debord's attitude, or it might have been part of his difficulties—he split up with Michèle Bernstein. I don't know, there were all kinds of circumstances that might have made him more polemical, more bitter, more violent. In the end, everything became oriented toward a kind of polemical violence. I think they ended up insulting just about everyone. And they also greatly exaggerated their role in May '68, after the fact.

The '68 movement didn't come from the Situationists. At Nanterre there was a little groupuscule known as "*les enragés*." They were insulting everyone too. But they were the ones who made the movement. The movement of March 22 was made by students, among them Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who was not a Situationist.

It was an energetic group that took form as the events developed, with no program, no project—an informal group, with whom the Situationists linked up, but it wasn't they who constituted the group. The group took shape apart from them—Trotskyists joined up with the March 22 group,

everybody ended up joining with them little by little. We called it “getting aboard a moving train.” So even though the Situationists at Nanterre may have joined up with the group from the outset, they weren’t the animators, the creative element. In fact, the movement began in a big, crowded amphitheater where I was giving a course, and where students whom I knew well asked me if we could name some delegates to go to the administration to protest the blacklist. (The administration was insisting on establishing a list of the most disruptive students in order to sanction them.) “Of course,” I said. So it was on that podium that the election took place of delegates to protest the blacklist business. And all sorts of people participated in that election, Trotskyists as well as Situationists.

The group of March 22 was formed after these negotiations and arguments with the administration, and then the group occupied the administration building. The stimulus was this business about the blacklist, and I was the one who concocted the blacklist. What actually happened was that the administration phoned my office and asked for a list of the most politically disruptive students. I told them to get lost; I frequently had to say to the dean in those days, “Sir, I am not a cop.” So the blacklist never existed, in black and white. But they were trying to do it, and I told the students to defend themselves; I stirred things up a bit. One has one’s little perversities, after all.

I always tell the story. On Friday evening, May 13, we were all at the Place Denfert-Rochereau. Around the Belfort lion, there were maybe seventy or eighty thousand students discussing what to do next. The Maoists wanted to go out to the suburbs, toward Ivry; the anarchos and the Situationists wanted to go make noise in the bourgeois quarters. The Trotskyists were in favor of heading for the proletarian districts, the eleventh arrondissement, while the students from Nanterre wanted to go to the Latin Quarter. Then some people cried out, “We’ve got friends in the Prison de la Santé—let’s go see them!” And then the whole crowd started off down the Boulevard Arago toward the Prison de la Santé. We saw hands at the windows, we yelled things, and then we headed off toward the Latin Quarter. It was chance. Or maybe it wasn’t chance at all. There must have been a desire to go back to the Latin Quarter, to not get too far away from the center of student life. There must have been some obscure feeling of attachment to the Latin Quarter . . . it was curious, after that hour of floating around, not knowing which way to go. And then, in the Latin Quarter, the television was there, until midnight, that is. Then there was just the radio, Europe No. 1. And at about three in the morning—in complete bedlam, there was noise from all directions—a radio guy handed the microphone to Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who had the brilliant idea of simply saying: “General strike, general strike, general strike.” And that was the decisive moment; it was then that there was action. That was what took the police by surprise. That students were

making trouble, that there was a little violence, some wounded, tear gas, paving stones, barricades, and bombs—that was all just the children of the bourgeoisie having a good time. But a general strike, well, that was no laughing matter.