

The Situation of the Situationists: A Cultural Left in France in the 1950s and 60s

MOST OF US, if we know anything at all about the Situationist International, know Guy Debord's brilliant and famous pamphlet *The Society of the Spectacle* and, if we are old enough, perhaps remember the striking cover of its English language edition showing rows of moviegoers sitting passively and expectantly in a theater wearing 3-D glasses. Debord and the Situationists made their big splash with that pamphlet which was published in France in 1968 just in time to inspire young people with its powerful anti-commodity and anti-capitalist message. Society, said Debord, had been emptied of all life, reducing us to an audience of contrived spectacles, the consumers of vapid commodities, the incarnation of alienation. Some have credited Debord and his Situationist co-thinkers with having inspired the student movement which in turn detonated the national strike that brought France to a standstill and shook the foundations of President Charles De Gaulle's government in 1968. While Debord wrote a remarkable pamphlet and the Situationists offered a fascinating critique of contemporary capitalist society, crediting them with being the catalysts of France's May-June 1968 events would be going too far. Mostly they were an interesting group of Bohemian intellectuals on the left who happened to be in the right place at the right time for one remarkable moment.

McKenzie Wark, a teacher at the New School for Social Research and Eugene Lang College, makes no extravagant claims for the Situationists' role in modern history, though he does argue that the group's ideas about art and architecture, about geography and city planning, about modern cities and

capitalism, and about everyday life and revolutionary change remain meaningful. Wark's book, one of about a dozen studies of the Situationists published in the last forty years or so, traces the group from its origins in post-World War II Europe until its demise in the early-1970s. *The Beach Beneath the Street* is a micro-history of the sort of aesthetic-political sects that issue manifestos declaring that theirs is the only and true art and that their school of art provides the only real foundation for revolutionary politics.

Most readers – myself included – will find the book lists all too many groups and artists and fails to explain clearly both what these groups and artists meant and why what they thought, did, and wrote is important. The central problem is that Wark tends himself to become a Situationist, speaking in their peculiar jargon, rather than explicating and elucidating their ideas. The author's aphoristic style produces some gems, but they mostly get lost in the recitation of cliques, manifestos, bohemian theorists, and oddball artists. I fear that in writing this review, I too will have to list too many names, but please excuse me because it comes with the territory.

Wark traces the intellectual history of small groups of artists and Marxists intellectuals whose spiritual origins might be traced back to the Surrealists and Dadaists of the early twentieth century. Beginning in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood of Paris in the late 1940s, in an ambience of jazz, existentialism, elements of American popular culture, and radical currents of socialism, a group of thinkers and writers began to criticize the culture of capitalism while at the same time rejecting the alternative of Soviet Communism. They eventually came to call themselves "situationists" but the term does not refer to their contemporary Sartre's "situation" where human freedom encounters physical and social limits. On the contrary, their "situation" refers, as Wark writes, to the "probabilities of realizing a desire." If

Sartre's freedom in the situation was conceived during World War II under Nazi occupation, theirs is conceived in the post-war struggle between Communism and capitalism and in the process of reconstruction in Europe. The question: What sort of Europe to reconstruct?

What fascinated Debord, and the artists Gil. J. Wolman, Isidore Isou, and Ivan Chtcheglov was the idea of the city and the question of how the city might be saved from capitalism, how art might be saved from dealers, galleries, publishers, and movie producers, and how architecture might be saved from their nemesis and foil Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier, a Swiss-born French architect inspired by American industrialism, designed huge apartment complexes and envisioned entire cities created along modernistic lines. Debord and friends (at this point they called themselves The Lettrists) were appalled by Le Corbusier's radiant city which, as they saw it, represented the architecture of the ruling class, the power of capitalism, and the alienation of modern life. As Wark writes, they saw in Le Corbusier's vision "the colonization of everyday life at the heart of empire."

While Le Corbusier envisioned the planned city and its stolid structures, the Lettrists dreamed of the city as life, as process, as change. Projecting the Bohemian lives they themselves led, revolving around alcohol, drugs, art, political debate, and love affairs, they imagined a city of movable parts and of infinite possibilities. The Situationists were interested less in Le Corbusier's modern, efficient capitalist city than they were in the drift (*dérive*) and the detours (*détournements*), literal and figurative strategies for resisting the dehumanization of contemporary life. Rejecting the capitalist commodity form, the Situationists conceived of a society based on mutual gift giving, the potlatch. They envisioned an emerging communism of culture that could contribute to creating a communist society with real freedom.

The Situationists absorbed a variety of intellectual,

aesthetic, and political influences. One of the greatest influences on the future Situationists was the former Communist Henri Lefebvre whose writings decried the colonization of everyday life by the commodity form. His 1947 book *Critique of Everyday Life* provided intellectual tools for analyzing the process of reification and its impact on our ordinary existence. Another influence was Paul Henry Chombart de Lauwe, a former Free French fighter pilot, who used aerial photography and interviews with workers as part of a monumental study of Paris published in 1952. Chombart, himself influenced by the Chicago School of sociology, pointed out how the city's concentric circles mapped class onto space. The Danish painter Asger Jorn, who had worked in the studios of Ferdinand Léger and Le Corbusier, brought his interests in painting, Scandinavian culture, and theory. Constant Nieuwenhuys, who believed that art had come to an end altogether, imagined what he called "unitary urbanism," and constructed a model of a future city called New Babylon. The American beatnik novelist Alexander Trocchi, author of the classic *Cain's Book*, linked the group intellectually to William Burroughs, Samuel Beckett, and the Olympia Press.

By 1957 the former Lettrists had evolved into the Situationist International, a kind of leftwing aesthetic political sect dominated by Debord and his collaborator Nieuwenhuys. The outstanding woman of the group, Jacqueline De Jong, editor of *The Situationist Times*, came to the conclusion that anyone who shared the group's views was actually a Situationist. Debord, however, continued to lead his sect, polemicizing against his opponents, and carrying out expulsions of dissidents.

Wrapped up in their little world, little even though it was cosmopolitan and international, they were utterly outside of the French intellectual mainstream of the time which was dominated by the existentialisms of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Camus, by the Stalinist Communist Party,

and by the university academics and the major publishing houses. As Wark writes, "They did not really take their place in the exchanges of views between the journals and groups of their time." And they participated in leftwing politics only briefly and marginally, Debord and one or two others becoming involved for a while in Socialisme ou Barbarie (Socialism or Barbarism), the group led by the brilliant Cornelius Castoriadis. A former Communist, then a Trotskyist, Castoriadis developed his own trenchant analysis of the Soviet Union and its bureaucracy, before becoming a Lacanian psychoanalyst and joining others in the great descent into the post-modern.

Except for that one passing flirtation between the marginal artists and the fringe leftists, the Situationist International never really participated in politics as an organized attempt to change public opinion, to develop a social base, to build an organization, and to struggle for power. Yet somehow, for a moment, the Situationists emerged as an influential little current in the great May-June 1968 days in France. Their critique of modern life – its bureaucracy, its oppressive hierarchies, its commodities, its spectacles, its emptiness in the midst of plenty – spoke to the French students and young workers and provided insight into their own frustrations with the university and the society as a whole.

The Situationist International, it seems to me, mirrors on a very small scale and with certain distortions, the experience of the Frankfurt School – Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Habermas and friends – who, surrounded by Nazism and Stalinism and seeing the working class movement not up to the task of resisting them, took a defensive stand on the ground of high culture: in particular the classic tradition from the Greeks, through the Renaissance to the European novel, classical music, and the plastic arts of the nineteenth century. Finding Marxism not entirely up to the task of understanding their situation, the Frankfurt School

supplemented it with psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and existentialism. With the coming of the 1960s, the anti-colonial struggles, the French events of 1968, the civil rights movement and black power in the United States, the Frankfurt School's ideas of aesthetic Marxism suddenly found an audience in the new movements.

The Situationists seem like a miniature of this experience. With no apparent revolutionary alternative in France, the Situationists too turned to art as an alternative, not the classic traditions but the Expressionist, Surrealist, and Dada traditions. Guy Debord and his friends, however, never measured up to the stature of Sartre in France or the Frankfurt School in Germany, and with the coming of the structuralist, post-structuralist, and post-modern intellectuals such as Althusser, Foucault and Lacan, they were eclipsed and passed into obscurity. The Situationists' central ideas that their anti-art, art criticism, and way of life formed part of a movement toward a new communism proved to be wishful thinking, yet their utopian ideas contributed in a small way at least at one crucial historical moment to what turned out to be one of the greatest revolutionary movements of the late twentieth century.