



Author: N S Pearce

# The Situationalist International: then and now

'The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has achieved the total occupation of social life.'

- Guy Debord: 'The Society of the Spectacle.'

Who were the Situationalist International (S.I.), what did they believe and how influential have their ideas been since their dissolution in 1972? These questions can be answered by examining: 1) the avant-garde movements in art and literature that first inspired the S.I., 2) the founding of the S.I. in 1957 and the ideas that they fused at that moment, 3) the split in 1962 and the creation of the Second S.I., 4) the rise of Guy Debord and the revolutionary upheavals in Paris in 1968, 5) the impact of Situationalist ideas in the politico-cultural scene in the UK during the 1970's and 6) the positions of individual Situationalists today.

Firstly, one of the avant-garde groups which influenced the Situationalists was the Dadaists. They had complex sources for their radical art critiques which they vigorously applied to both their art and lives. Dada embraced the 'new' in his 1918 manifesto:

'I am writing a manifesto and there's nothing I want, and yet I'm saying certain things, and in I am against manifestos, as I am against principles...Liberty DADA, DADA; the roar of contorted pains, the interweaving of contraries

and of all contradictions, freaks and irrelevances LIFE.'

who had said:

(the poet should) become a seer by a long, prodigious and rational disordering of all his senses (embracing all forms) of love, of suffering, of madness.'

- Arthur Rimbaud.

# wakeyourmind.co.uk

However the avant-garde was inevitably linked to the oppressed and Dada's art had flourished in the working class movement. Situationalist writer Mustapha Khayati would later argue that:

'Dada had a chance for realization with the Spartakists, with the revolutionary practice of the German proletariat, (their failure) made the failure of Dada inevitable.'

The S.I. formed itself at a small village in Italy on July 28th 1957. Their intention was to reactivate radical art movements like Dada and Surrealism. However they came to the conclusion that Dada was the end of art in the West and that a new form of creativity was necessary:

'The modern artist does not paint but creates directly...Life and art are One.'

- Tristan Tzara.

Emboldened the S.I. produced a journal called 'Internationale Situationiste' in 1958 which contained an important insight into the direction the S.I. would move:

'A new form of mental illness has swept the planet: banalisation. Everyone is hypnotized by work and comfort: by the...washing machine.

The liberation of man from material cares (has) become a life-destroying obsession.'

- Gilles Ivain. I.S. 1, 1958.

A key moment in the development of the S.I. came in 1962 when a split occurred and a Second S.I. created which was interested in what could be called pure art. The 'French Section' and its main theoretician Guy Debord became the dominant force and he began to apply the ideas of the S.I. to Marx's theory of alienation. Marx had said a worker under capitalism only:

'Feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working does not feel at home.'

- Karl Marx.

Alienated from their own labour (for Marx labour is the 'species being' of humanity) these relations of alienation are reproduced throughout capitalism. Debord in his 1968 book 'The Society of the Spectacle' had refined these ideas into the concept of the 'spectacle':

'The entire life of societies in which modern production heralds itself as an accumulation of spectacles.'

'The spectacle is not an aggregate of images but a social relation among people, mediated by images.'

'The spectacle is capital accumulated to such a degree it becomes an image.'

Debord quoted a letter to Marx from Ruge (1844) towards the conclusion: 'Shall we live long enough to see a social revolution.'

# wakeyourmind.co.uk

In May 1968 French students rioted, the workers occupied factories and a huge General Strike began, the S.I. was at a pinnacle. After the defeat of the revolution the S.I. collapsed into endless theoretical debate and personal animosity dissolving itself in 1972. However the ideas of the S.I. were sown in the underground scene of the UK and influenced groups like the 'Angry Brigade' who spoke with a fist and the 'Sex Pistols' who howled with music.

An unorthodox Situationist UK terrorist group called the 'Angry Brigade' carried out activities 1969-1973. Most of their operations were against property, but this did not prevent the state from giving them very long prison sentences. However they carried out a number of symbolic attacks: 1) Minister of Employment, Richard Carr, had his house bombed during the strikes against the Industrial Relations Act and 2) An attack on Miss World contest in 1970 showed solidarity with the Women's Movement. The Brigade hoped that the spontaneity of the 'autonomous working class' would be triggered and the 'spectacle' broken. However the S.I. had been critical of terrorist tactics in 1969:

'From the strategical perspective of social struggles it must first be said we should never play with terrorism.'

- Internationale Situationiste 1969.

The Angry Brigade was imprisoned in 1973, some for 30 years.

Malcolm McLaren had been acquainted with the pro-Situationist group 'King Mob' in the early 1970's and he was therefore aware of Situationist texts. Later he set up a shop called 'Sex' which became a 'hang-out' for those interested in cultural rebellion; he formed from the circle that grew around him there the punk-rock band 'The Sex Pistols.'

'a tide of nihilistic refusal of the spectacle was initiated.'

- Sadie Plant.

A pamphlet called 'The End of Music' produced in 1978 was circulated around the scene; it described 'punk' as a movement with:

'no desire to negate music...merely to make it free.'

But after a brief blooming of creativity, individualism and some solidarity the 'punk' movement was assimilated back into the 'spectacle'. But McLaren had before that injected fresh life into the Situationist critique for a new generation. Punk had claimed as DADA did that anybody could be a poet and that art was radical. Punk, a major working class movement, had drowned in commercialism and hedonism. The decline of Sid Vicious into heroin addiction and the death of both Sid and his partner Nancy were like bells toiling, ringing out the end of punk. However we can see how the fundamental concepts of the S.I. continued and were metamorphosed in the UK.

What are the Situationists saying now? One of the leading French intellectuals from previous struggles, Raoul Vaneigem, is tuning into a tendency within Situationist thought that can be traced back to the first issue of 'Internationale Situationiste' in 1958 (see above). He argued in 2000 that:

'Time spent working is time lost...time which you would otherwise be free to spend however one wished.'

# wakeyourmind.co.uk

'In the commodity system the aim of obligatory work is to churn out commodities...Commodities have no purpose other than to sustain the profits and power of the ruling class.'

'By accumulating and replacing commodities with your obligatory work you are merely boosting the power of the bosses.'

Therefore the argument is 'don't do obligatory work' as a method of breaking the 'spectacle'. This is similar to the first recorded piece of Situationalist graffiti which was on the 'Left Bank' in Paris in 1957; it reads 'never work.'

A final solution to the hegemony of the bourgeoisie can only lie in, as Marx argued, an active class conscious proletariat. S.I. had said correctly in 1963:

'We don't claim to be developing a new revolutionary programme all by ourselves.'

By N.S.Pearce