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# Nowhere To Run

By Stewart Home

Stewart Home reviews two new publications dealing with the Situationist International and other political currents of the 1960s: *Art-Ist* magazine's Situationist International special issue and *Dancin' In The Streets!*, a collection of texts from Rebel Worker and Heatwave

These two recent publications show the way in which discussion about the Situationist International might be broadened out. In recent years far too much attention has been focused on Guy Debord as an allegedly key figure within the SI. While Debord was one of several individuals central to the group, creatively he was dependent upon collaborators to a degree its other leading members were not. Debord's strength was as a classical French prose stylist, thus he very often wrote up ideas that were developed collectively and for various reasons assorted recuperators wish to place his signature alone upon these texts. While other Situationists such as Asger Jorn were original if sometimes rather wayward thinkers and doers, Debord remained to the last politically naïf (and I say this because I believe his revolutionary fervour was sincere, I'd call him a bourgeois political sophisticate if I doubted his passion for communism). As a result of this naivety, when viewed from a purely Debordist perspective the SI is inconsequential, a marginal political sect with a handful of followers whose low-grade repackaging of a very specific strand of Marxist discourse is likely to be found wanting by anyone who has encountered a broad spectrum of left-communist positions. Debord was anything but theoretically rigorous, he simply adopted ideas wholesale from his collaborators regardless of how backward they were. Thus under the influence of the Socialism Or Barbarism group, Debord treated the USSR and Mao's China as state capitalist regimes, an idea that not only fetishises the notion of the bureaucracy but clearly has Trotskyist roots even if Debord plagiarised his version of this analysis from post-Trotskyist currents. Indeed this absurd notion was further reified by Debord into rhetoric about the concentrated and diffuse spectacle (see in particular theses 64 and 65 of his book *Society Of The Spectacle*). By way of contrast, after an exhaustive examination of the agricultural question within the Russian revolution, Amadeo Bordiga concluded that the USSR was simply a capitalist society and that to suggest it was a new social form to be called state or bureaucratic capitalism was to mystify matters.

Boynik in his introduction to the Situationist edition of *Art-Ist* says that despite being edited in Kosovo and published in Turkey, the tome he's prepared isn't intended to reflect the special conditions of reception of the Situationists in either of these places. While Boynik's endeavours will probably gain their greatest circulation in and around Istanbul, he wishes to address an international audience with a dual Turkish/English language publication whose English component currently has the potential to reach the greatest number of readers. Some of the writers gathered here will be overly familiar to English language consumers of Situationist commentary and translation including Tom McDonough, T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith. These writers also provide the dominant and thus most retrograde view of the Situationist International within the Anglo-American world. McDonough's opinions are deformed by an adolescent hero-worship of Debord, McDonough's puff-piece entitled 'Delirious Paris: Mapping as a Paranoiac-Critical Activity' draws parallels between lettrist cum situationist psychogeography and earlier surrealist ventures. McDonough is competent enough doing research work in an archive, but what issues from his pen is as dull as ditch water and not even half as edifying. Clark and Nicholson-Smith's views enjoy a certain caché among the chattering classes because they were once members of the Situationist International. What they contribute to *Art-Ist* is a reprint of the article 'Why Art Can't Kill The Situationist International'. While Clark and Nicholson-Smith wish to distinguish themselves from what they stigmatise as the conventional 'left' (i.e. Régis Debray and the New Left Review), they show little interest in engaging with those standing

to their left as exemplified by the Luther Blissett critique *Guy Debord Is Really Dead* which is also reprinted here. In short, the efforts of Clark and Nicholson-Smith are indicative of a degeneration into unreconstructed anarchism, rather than the maturation away from it that characterises the trajectory of others from their milieu. Thus in the piece under review they mention a get together between the SI and groups affiliated with Internationale Anarchiste, but have nothing to say about the considerably more interesting meeting which took place between the SI and those ultra-leftists who later became the International Communist Current. Clark's anarchist fetish is even more readily evident in books he's published such as *Farewell To An Idea* than it is here. Clark treats anarchism as the opposition to what he characterises as the conventional left (that is those who take their inspiration from Bolshevism), rather than a more primitive version of the same thing. It should go without saying that what most clearly distinguishes Bolshevism from other Marxist currents is its notions of organisation, which while stemming from Russian Popularism were systemised by Bakunin, the founding father of the 'modern' anarchist movement.

Anselm Jappe, whose fawning Debord biography is available in English translation, is represented by an article entitled: 'Were the Situationists the Last Avant-Garde?' Jappe's banalities on this subject include the following: 'the avant-garde is no more a supra-historical and eternal category than art itself is, but rather that it is a category bequeathed us by a specific moment in the development of capitalist society.' This is true of course, as readers of 35-year-old works of Marxist aesthetics such as Roger Taylor's *Art, An Enemy of the People* are well aware. Jappe however links this homily to the claim that: 'the route taken by the Situationists, and certainly Guy Debord's personal journey, do indeed bring the historical trajectory of the avant-gardes to a logical conclusion, to a full stop, as it were, which also clearly demonstrates the impossibility of an avant-garde existing today.' As a right-wing mystical cretin whose ideas exude the rotten egg smell of the idea of God, Jappe truly believes that the last shall be first and he desperately wants Debord to be both first and last. Much work remains to be done in determining the exact parameters of the period to which the avant-garde belongs and whether this has indeed come to a full stop. This period will certainly prove to be longer than the unduly brief time span connoted by Jappe's deployment of the term 'moment'. Analysis rather than Jappe's bald assumption that capitalism has outlived the avant-garde is required here. Indeed, the avant-garde has even on occasion been interpreted as one of the signs of a crisis of capitalism, and to announce its end can now function as a means of proclaiming the supra-historic victory of the bourgeoisie, albeit in a less grand style than recent and already superannuated talk about the end of history. Boynik is clearly critical of such positions since he begins his contribution 'Politics of the Images' with the following: 'Situationist International is certainly not the last representative of the avant-garde in the 20th century, but it is the last representative of the intellectual chain rooted at the turn of the century...' Much depends on how one defines the avant-garde and what form of periodisation is used. That said, since the development of capitalism is necessarily uneven, Jappe's pathetic Eurocentrism is patently evident from his claim that 'our man in Paris' Guy Debord brought 'the historical trajectory of the avant-gardes... to a full stop...' Likewise, Jappe whines: 'Capitalism has as its sole aim the tautological accumulation of dead labour...' This is almost a complete inversion of Bordiga's far subtler position in 'Murdering The Dead', and is what one would expect from a social democrat posing as a radical.

Roberto Ohrt, author of the German language tome on the SI *Phantom Avant-Garde*, should perhaps be more widely read in the Anglo-American world. His book was at one time bought by Verso but shelved due to the competition from less well illustrated (and thus cheaper to produce) English language works. Here Ohrt contributes a piece with the self-explanatory title of 'Guy Debord, Avant-Garde and Socialisme Ou Barbarie', which examines the relationship between the Situationists and the Socialism Or Barbarism group. There are also a couple of reprints from the Situationist International journal, a look at Situationist activities north of Keil entitled 'Situationist Map of Denmark' by Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, and thoughts on the SI by various artists and academics. Miklos

Erhardt's 'How Can the Demand of Playfulness Turn into Terror?' is in part an account of the life of former Hungarian Situationist Atilla Kotanyi, and goes some way towards providing a more expansive take on the SI. That said, Erhardt relays little of Kotanyi's anger at the way Debord placed his name on other people's theorising. Indeed Kotanyi's vehemence ran as far as claiming that in his heart (not ideologically) Debord was a fascist. Erhardt merely tells us that in his opinion Kotanyi's memories of his time with the Situationist International weren't particularly happy. Former English SI member Charles Radcliffe contributes an article on 'Pre-Situationist Days In Notting Hill' which entirely escapes the dead hand of academia which weighs so heavily on the verbiage of T. J. Clark. Almost as delightful is the 1991 interview given by the former German Situationist Dieter Kunzelmann which is quoted at length within Stephen Kurr's article 'Nothing To Talk About'. Here's Kunzelmann in mid-flow: 'Because Asger Jorn wasn't a part of it anymore, because SPUR wasn't a part anymore, all the artistic creativity, all the productivity was damaged. Because Debord kicked out all the artists who did something. What's left is the myth that the Situationists had anything to do with the Parisian May. I deny it, all of it was hatched by Debord, it is known that he was in the Bahamas in May 1968... The hyped Guy Debord was a simple fad, a very charming, nice, real fad. I am more and more convinced that Asger Jorn was searching for a figure which would run around for him. I supposed that Asger Jorn invented the figure of Guy Debord, in that terms that somebody was necessary to play the executor, to play the Stalin. Asger Jorn financed everything of the Situationists. Debord would have starved to death without Asger Jorn...'

There is much in what Boynik has gathered together that will already be familiar to English language readers, and some curious additions to our knowledge of the SI. However Boynik has simultaneously produced what might be seen as a detournement of the ongoing discourse about the Situationists, albeit one that is every bit as accidental as my previous foray into this area *What Is Situationism? A Reader* (AK Press, Edinburgh and San Francisco 1996). Boynik has brought together assorted texts relating to the SI that are at times contradictory. I did the same in *What Is Situationism?*, the idea in my case being to illustrate the way the group had been historicised in English rather than to simply provide texts that I found worthwhile. However, my book ended up poorly designed by an individual AK Press found who offered to set the text cost free. Unfortunately this unpaid typesetter failed to correct hundreds of errors that crept into her setting, despite the fact that I carefully marked them up for her. The Situationist edition of *Art-Ist* suffers from similar flaws, at least as far as the English text goes. Of the pieces not originally composed in English, the translations are of variable quality, and some are incomprehensible in places. For example, from Rena & Vladeta Jeremic's 'Realisation of the Situationist Projections': 'We can explain this by way of neoism. The neoist is like a maniristic rest of situationism, knocked out by economies he was following. He does not offer a way out of project's multilayers, which situate themselves like unstable criticism inside of the parodistic contra-cultural worshipping of all subfields and models of marketing economy.' The problems here seem to be twofold; one the English rendering and two, a misperception of neoism within central Europe due to the German language publication and subsequent translation and wide dissemination of the *Neoismus* book by Oliver Marchart. However, a clear translation of the Jeremics' text is required for an interested English language reader like me to untangle exactly what is going on here. Likewise, the sense of clarity within this issue of *Art-Ist* isn't helped by the columns of English text being in places pasted up in the wrong order. On top of which the text has been printed in green, a colour that may look pretty but is notoriously difficult to read. Whether this was done to satirise the anti-ocular iconoclasm of Debord, or simply because the look of the publication was prioritised over its legibility, remains open to conjecture.

There are no such design issues with Franklin Rosemont and Charles Radcliffe's *Dancin' In The Streets*. No flashy layout here, just plain black text on white paper with some carefully chosen but unobtrusive illustrations. Nearly four hundred and fifty pages long, this book still only represents a selection of material from the publications *Rebel Worker* and *Heatwave*. Particularly useful are the

addition of long biographical introductions by the editors. Rosemont recounts the origins of his political activity in the beatnik milieu, his involvement with the Industrial Workers of the World, his travels in Europe during the mid-'60s where he met both André Breton and Guy Debord in Paris, and in London produced with Charles Radcliffe the sixth issue of *Rebel Worker*. When Rosemont returned to the US, Radcliffe published two issues of the magazine *Heatwave* as a continuation of this activity. Neither man sets out on his adventures with a particularly coherent political viewpoint, but positions are sharpened by direct experience of struggle and quickly start to move beyond the recalcitrant anarchism from which they begin. Rosemont was seen by Debord as a potential catalyst for an American Situationist group, but he chose to work with André Breton's circle, and went on to found the Chicago Surrealists. Starting with issue two of *Heatwave*, Radcliffe began to collaborate with Chris Gray and not long afterwards they came to form the core of an English Situationist group. T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith were always more peripheral to so called Situationist activities in London. Being Parisian satellites of Debord these aspirant academics were set (most likely without their being informed of it) and failed the task of restraining the more naturally rebellious Gray and Radcliffe from doing anything that might subvert the 'invisible' hierarchy that structured the French group.

Radcliffe soon drifted away from the Situationist International and found himself on the run after being charged with forgery. The case was absurd, he'd been printing low grade reproductions of US dollar bills with anti-Vietnam slogans added to them. These had been widely disseminated but no one had attempted to pass off this crude but effective propaganda as genuine currency. After coming up before the beak and being found guilty, Radcliffe went on to work as an editor at the underground newspaper *Friends* and involve himself in extensive soft drug dealing and smuggling. Shortly after Radcliffe resigned from the SI, Gray was expelled for refusing to break with New York comrades involved with the *Up Against The Wall Motherfucker* collective. Clark and Nicholson-Smith were expelled too, they'd proved incapable of controlling Gray and Radcliffe. Much of this story emerges from what Radcliffe contributes to *Art-Ist* and *Dancin' In The Streets*. While the two texts are not identical there are innumerable overlaps. That said, each text has been altered to reflect of the interests of its respective editors (Boynik and Rosemont), with the emphasis undergoing some radical shifts in comparison to early pre-publication versions. I will restrict myself to quoting Radcliffe from *Dancin' In The Streets*: 'At the time, Situationist ideas seemed to me to represent the best available blueprint for leaving the twentieth-century. And yet, when I joined the Situationists I had expected not only incisive theory but also a ludic exuberance (of which, however, I saw little sign) and at least some prophetic foreshadowing of the desired future within the actual organisation. In reality SI seemed more than a tad dull, academic, humourless, old-fashioned and, dare I say it, boring...'

Radcliffe's misfortune was to join the SI after Debord assumed dominance over the group in Paris. Had he assumed membership prior to 1962 his experiences might have been very different. It should go without saying that the point of revolutionary activity is to overcome capitalist canalisation. It is not simply art that must be 'realised and suppressed', but all specialised discourse. By privileging politics over art, rather than attempting to smash both alongside all the other reactionary abstractions ranging from philosophy to occultism, the post 1962 Paris centred Situationist International showed itself to be markedly inferior to the 2nd Situationist International, *Up Against The Wall Motherfucker*, *Auto-Destructive Art*, *King Mob* and even early Fluxus (and this despite the obvious theoretical and organisational weaknesses of these groups). All of anarchism can be found in the idea that it is possible to live differently in this world, and the charge of anarchism must be laid at the feet of Debord and his acolytes. Revolutionary judgements of organisations are to be made on the basis of how they unite theory with practice, whereas the would-be critical critics seeking to elevate Debord over Asger Jorn or Jacqueline de Jong wish in a typically academic fashion to separate theory from practice. From a bourgeois perspective Debord is undoubtedly preferable to *King Mob* or the 2nd Situationist International, precisely because the forms of distinction favoured by the ruling class are diametrically

opposed to proletarian judgement.

To briefly return to *Dancin' In The Streets*, it is an inspiring book which shows how as the political situation heated up in the mid to late '60s, the theorising of open minded cultural activists could become increasingly coherent as it was reforged through practice (unfortunately without yet achieving perfection, since it is still marred by many weaknesses of the time). Alongside much else, including Boynik's special issue of *Art-Ist*, it also provides yet another nail in the coffin of the myth of the coherence of the Situationist International. Rather than fetishising the past, we need to develop more critical attitudes towards it, so that we may move boldly into a revolutionary future.

Stewart Home

*Art-Ist: Contemporary Art Magazine*, Situationist International special, edited by Sezgin Boynik (Istanbul 2004)

*Dancin' In The Streets! Anarchists, IWWs, Surrealists, Situationists & Provos in the 1960s as recorded in the pages of The Rebel Worker and Heatwave*. Edited with introductions by Franklin Rosemont & Charles Radcliffe. (Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, Chicago 2005)