

A Stunted Growth: On a New Edition of *On the Poverty of Student Life*

By Bill Brown

In 1965, the existence, ideas and actions of the Situationist International (SI), a very small but incredibly fertile group of libertarian-Marxist writers, filmmakers, painters, and architects founded in Italy in 1957, was known in the United States, but only by a handful of people. They'd found out about the SI through a former member of the group, the Scottish author Alexander Trocchi, who'd in 1962 founded Project Sigma, which, unlike the SI, was intended to be a large organization, open to all kinds of people, and not just extremists. The lyrics to Bob Dylan's "Love Minus Zero/No Limit" ("In the dime-stores and bus stations / people talk of situations / read books, repeat quotations / write conclusions on the wall") and the title of Allen Ginsberg's poem "How to Make a March a Spectacle" (both from 1965) testify to the influence that the SI had on American popular culture via Project Sigma.

In 1966-1967, the SI "suddenly" became famous, both in France and the United States. By the end of 1968, which was marked by unprecedented events in France during May-June (a spontaneous nation-wide general strike and a widespread occupations movement), there was a four-member section of the SI in New York City and, by 1971, the year that the SI disbanded, there were so-called pro-situ groups active on both coasts (especially the Bay Area). At the end of the 1970s, there were several punk bands (the Sex Pistols and Gang of Four among them) and punk zines (*Slash*) that claimed to be influenced by the situ. And, finally, in the 1980s and '90s, the academic and postmodern-art worlds got involved in the post-*festum* celebration of what they mistakenly called situationism. And that's where situationism is today: in the words of Mustapha Khayati (see below), it is "a revolutionary movement that now has its place in museums."

What unleashed this torrent? What allowed the SI's repeated attempts to create a really good scandal to finally succeed? It was the so-called Strasbourg Scandal, which, in a single phrase, summarizes both the contents of a remarkable pamphlet called *On the Poverty of Student Life, Considered in its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Particularly Intellectual Aspects, And a Modest Proposal for its Remedy* and the circumstances of and responses to its publication in Strasbourg, France, in November 1966.

There's a new book out on the subject: *On the Poverty of Student Life, Considered in its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Particularly Intellectual Aspects, And a Modest Proposal for its Remedy: Members of the Situationist International and Students from Strasbourg*, edited by Mehdi El Hajoui and Anna O'Meara (Brooklyn and Philadelphia: Common Notions, May 2022), 372 pages, soft cover, \$24. The core of this new book is its second section. In it, the editors reprint the French original and *Ten Days that Shook the University*, the pamphlet's first translation into English, which was undertaken by two British Situationists, Donald Nicholson-Smith and T.J. Clark (1967). Section Two also offers a brand-new note on this translation by Nicholson-Smith (2021) and a reproduction of an early handwritten draft of the pamphlet's first part by the Situationist Mustapha Khayati, who came up with the title and wrote the vast majority of the text.

Missing from this section are an unfortunately large number of crucial documents: the six letters that SI cofounder Guy Debord sent Khayati between 9 September and 29 October 1966; André Bertrand's *The Return of the Durruti Column* (spelling mistake in the original), a détourned comic strip that announced the pamphlet's publication and told the story of the SI's development (October 1966); "Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal," published by the SI in issue #11 of its journal *Internationale situationniste* (October 1967); the two letters that Khayati sent to Champ Libre when this publishing house sought to bring out a commercial reprint of the pamphlet (12 and 29 October 1976); the letter that Champ Libre's editor in chief, Gérard Lebovici, sent in response to Khayati's first missive (24 October 1976); the two subsequent public statements on the controversy issued by Khayati, one of which was sarcastically attributed to Lebovici (November 1976); a scathing response to the fake statement signed "Proletarians" and apparently written by Guy Debord (also November 1976); and, last but not least, an English translation of the pamphlet that is faithful to its original wording (the 1967 translation, as Nicholson-Smith notes, is more an adaptation than a translation: "a close representation of the original must be sought elsewhere"). Note that all of these texts are readily available, either online or in print.

The first section of the new book offers a series of brand-new texts that attempt to situate the pamphlet in its historical context: Anna O'Meara's "Zengakuren: How a Japanese Student Union Influenced the SI," which attempts to explain why post-1970 reprints and translations of *On the Poverty* removed all references to the Zengakuren (undated); Mehdi El Hajoui's interview with Khayati, who is very clear on the fact that "if one were to write a new version of *On the Poverty of Student Life* today, it definitely would not take students as its target" because "other actors [...] have claimed their rightful place as potential objects of contempt: the universe of the so-called 'counterculture,' of the 'alternative,' has become, after a lengthy detour, one of the dominant ideologies of our time" (interview conducted in 2021); and Allan Antliff's all-too-short "*On the Poverty of Student Life: The Black & Red Edition*," which focuses on the efforts in the 1960s and '70s by Fredy and Lorraine Perlman (first in Kalamazoo, later on in Detroit, Michigan) to publicize and further the revolutionary project of the SI, including publishing the first American edition of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (2021). (Note that Lorraine Perlman is also one of two people who have published a faithful translation of the original French version of *On the Poverty*; the other is Ken Knabb, editor and publisher of the *Situationist International Anthology*, first printed in 1981.) All three of the texts in this first section of the new book are valuable contributions to current scholarship on the SI. Had this section been longer, it might also have included documentation of the roles played in the 1960s by Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, the Chicago-based publishers of *The Rebel Worker*, and by the members of what would become the American section of the SI (especially Robert Chasse and Bruce Elwell), who were active in New York City between 1967 and 1970.

The third and final section, which takes up fully one-half (!) of the new book's pages, is devoted to cataloguing the hundred or so reprints of the pamphlet that have been published in over twenty languages since 1966. This part of the book is, I'm sorry to say, a waste of valuable space. Though the editor's notes speak of a wide range of vivid colors that were employed on the covers of these reprints (blue, light blue, grey-blue, dark blue, green, light green, olive-green, yellow-green, yellow, salmon, mustard, orange, pink, pink-orange, red, maroon, fuchsia, beige, and mauve), and though Khayati himself says that, in 1963 and 1964, one of the things about the issues of *Internationale situationniste* that "really stood out to us" was "its stunning aluminum foil wrappers," the reader of this book only sees reproductions in black and white and various

shades of grey. Note as well that the book's cover is a single color, a sickly green, with the type appearing as knocked-out white, and that barely legible reproductions appear in several places (pages 69, 124, and 234). And yet the back cover refers to the "beautiful reproductions" contained therein! No doubt these reductions in quality were necessary due to limited funds being available; the PDF of the book sold by Common Notions (\$20!) employs all of these colors, which makes all the difference in the world. Given this understandable but truly regrettable limitation, it would have been better if this section had been limited to text only, thus freeing up room for all the texts that might have been included, but were not.

And so, what we have here is a stunted growth, one that unsuccessfully tries to be three things at once, when being just one would have been sufficient to make a truly excellent book.

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