

# “The Situationists and the Cannibal Economy”

## By François Bott<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of 1968, a critic writing about situationist theory mockingly evoked a “little glimmer that wanders vaguely from Copenhagen to New York.”<sup>2</sup> But alas, that little glimmer became, that same year, a wildfire that broke out in all the citadels of the old world. In Paris, Prague, Rome, Mexico and elsewhere, the blaze revived poetry, the passion for life, in a world of phantoms. And many of those who, back then, refused the fate that was made for them, the insidious death that was inflicted on them every day of their lives – many of them (young workers, juvenile delinquents, students, and intellectuals) were situationists without knowing it or hardly knowing it.

Once the fire had apparently been extinguished, the sociologists and other futurologists of the State, as if to exorcize a terrible fear, strove to seek out the origins of the spring of 1968. They only collected scraps of the truth, in other words, pieces of a lie. Any rebellious street kid knew more about the May Revolution than they did. The distinguished thinkers didn’t dream of referring to the writings of the Situationist International, the journal of the same name – whose first issue came out in 1958 – or the books by Debord and Vaneigem.<sup>3</sup> The professionals of the dominant culture could, perhaps, have discovered that in May “the real movement” of history had coincided with “its own unknown theory,” or even that, in that spring, the arms of critique and the critique of arms had come together.

The thinkers of the old world would, perhaps, have perceived that the situationists had long ago detected the progress of “the old mole toward the light,” toward “the sunrise that, in a single flash, outlines the form of an entire new world.”<sup>4</sup>

And yet a few ideologues have had a quick look at the writings of the situationists. They have tried to place these resolute people under the heading of utopians. I’d really like to talk about utopia, at least if we understand it to be a revolutionary project that has never been realized in any place or at any time. But if we define it as some kind of chimera, this again proves that the bourgeoisie’s ideologues do not learn or retain anything from history. Or that they are myopic, inveterate amnesiacs, or skillful servants of power, who want to neutralize the danger by giving

---

<sup>1</sup> François Bott, « Les situationnistes et l’économie cannibale », *Les Temps modernes* n° 299-300, June 1971. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 19 July 2020. All footnotes by the translator, except where noted.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. François Châtelet, « La dernière internationale », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 3 January 1968; quoted in « Comment on ne comprend pas des livres situationnistes », *Internationale situationniste* #12 (September 1969).

<sup>3</sup> *Author’s note*: Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, 1967. Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations*, 1967. [Translator: Debord’s book, originally published by Buchet/Chastel in November 1967, would be reprinted by Champ Libre in September 1971, just two months after this article was published. Vaneigem’s book was published by Gallimard in December 1967 and was probably still in print. As for the Situationist International, it was still in existence, but would dissolve a few months later, in September 1971.]

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hegel, “Preface,” *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).

it, under the heading of prophecy, a place in the great *show*<sup>5</sup> of commodities and other mummies of the dominant culture.

But the thought of the Situationist International acts like a fresh breath in the suffocators,<sup>6</sup> in the cemeteries of false consciousness. All those who refuse, in a groping, uncertain way, to bury their will to live, those who perceive, in silence, the truth of their lives underneath the anesthetizing, dishonest masks of the various political ideologies, will rediscover or recognize themselves in this thought. The situationists have brought out the theory of the subterranean movement that drives the modern era. While the pseudo-inheritors of Marxism had, in a world puffed up with positivity, forgotten the part played by the negative and had thus consigned the dialectic to the antiquarians, the situationists announced the imminent resurgence of the negative and discerned the reality of the dialectic, of which they rediscovered the language and “insurrectional style” (Debord).

Starting in 1958, while “the Left” was completely occupied with and fascinated by the advertising launch of an anachronistic general, the last avatar of a caricatural heroism, the situationists began to formulate – on the basis of Fourier, Hegel and Marx, as well as the “great negators,” especially Sade and Lautréamont – a radical and unified critique of the modern totality and, since then, they haven’t stopped revealing the new faces of power in ideology, culture, urbanism, everyday life and its gloomy Sundays.

Having already colonized production, capitalism, in order to assure its development, had to colonize product consumption. The totality of life was subjected to the dictatorship of political economy. “The economy transforms the world but only transforms it into the world of the economy” (Debord). Leisure time became a time-commodity like work time. Previously scorned, the proletarian has been promoted to citizen-consumer. But the scorn hasn’t disappeared. It has ceased showing off.

The economy must ceaselessly impose and accelerate the consumption of the commodities that it produces. The truth of the economy is tautological. It repeats itself indefinitely, having no other goal than self-development in an always restarted identity. It imposes pressure on the purchase as if it were a sacred law, and the purchase itself takes the place of prayer in “the gigantic *supermarkets*,<sup>7</sup> the temples” of modernity (Debord).<sup>8</sup>

The economy endlessly eulogizes itself. “The spectacle doesn’t sing of men and their arms, but commodities and their passions” (Debord). It institutes the totalitarian domination of the quantitative, but disguises itself as a false qualitative, as a ghostly qualitative. The apology for the commodity disguises poverty and banality as false novelty. Empire of appearances and lies, domain of the inauthentic, the spectacle creates artificial needs demanded by the abundance of commodities. The necessities of survival – now satisfied by the development of technology – are ceaselessly increased by the ideology of the spectacle. The essential thing is to consume, not what is consumed. The *gadget*<sup>9</sup> summarizes the logic of the modern economy. Its use-value doesn’t really matter; the essential thing is its exchange-value: the gadget is a nothingness disguised as a being. It serves as a trophy in the religious doctrine of the commodity. “He or she

---

<sup>5</sup> English in original.

<sup>6</sup> The French here is *un révélateur dans les étouffoirs*.

<sup>7</sup> English in original.

<sup>8</sup> In point of fact, Thesis 174 of Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* refers to the “gigantic supermarkets” as “*usines de distribution*” (distribution factories), not temples.

<sup>9</sup> English in original.

who collects key chains . . . accumulates the *indulgences of the commodity*” (Debord); they attest to “his [or her] presence among the faithful,” as well as his or her “intimacy” with the Thing. The Thing reigns over all of life’s domains. The fetishism of the commodity is the soporific of modern society.

The dominant ideology has imprisoned ontological value in having as a support for appearing. “The spectacle constitutes the model for life” (Debord).<sup>10</sup> The buyer receives, with the object that he or she acquires, a role to play, “a portable ideology,” “a vision of the world on sale” (Vaneigem).<sup>11</sup>

Everyone alienates themselves in the roles indicated by the anonymous discourse of the Thing. Lived experience is sacrificed in the role: “the role embeds itself in the lived” (Vaneigem).<sup>12</sup> The spectacle is the enchantment of modern society. Each person is subjected to the reign of phantasmagoria. The socially alienated, like the mentally alienated, lose themselves, forget themselves, in a *character* [un *personnage*]. Capitalism sells us ready-to-wear madness.

What the world expresses is the absence of subjectivity; what is represented, in disguise, is the abstract history of things. The cannibal economy<sup>13</sup> is *abstract* in the sense that it acts as a *separate, autonomous power*. It excludes a person from him- or herself by including him or her in a role; it *draws the person out of him- or herself*; it *reifies* him or her. “The exteriority of the spectacle with respect to a person . . . appears in the fact that his or her gestures are no longer his or her own, but those of another who represents them to him or her” (Debord). The exteriority of the Thing inscribes itself in the interiority of the subject and separates him or her from him or herself: *seduces* him or her, in the etymological sense. Cracked, broken up and mutilated, each person underestimates him- or herself, exiled from his or her most intimate life, “expropriated from his [or her] own skin” (Vaneigem),<sup>14</sup> absent from him- or herself and the world. The economy shows itself to be a gigantic *hold-up*<sup>15</sup> of life. In itself, the spectacle contains “the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, the enslavement and the negation of real life” (Debord). The spectacle is life upside-down: our pale daily death.

Urbanism reveals itself to be “the very technique of separation” (Debord). In their isolation, city-dwellers are subjected to the anonymous power of the economy. Every evening, the solitary people close in upon themselves in the desert of the town. And, come the next morning, they begin again the sad voyage of the taciturn crowds. The domination of the quantitative changes us into sandwich-board men, into human commodities: the objects do not communicate. Only the qualitative establishes the unity of men and women with themselves, with the world, and with others.

Towns and lives decompose into spaces, into dead times, identical and bleak. The time of life fades into the dead time of things. Look at the faces – hurried, anxious and distraught – of

---

<sup>10</sup> The original text by Debord in fact says “the spectacle constitutes the current model of the socially dominant [form of] life.”

<sup>11</sup> The exact phrase is “portable ideologies” in the original text by Vaneigem. The second phrase cannot be found in it.

<sup>12</sup> In the original text by Vaneigem, the phrase is “they [roles] are alienation embedded in lived experience.”

<sup>13</sup> This phrase doesn’t appear in any Situationist text that I am aware of.

<sup>14</sup> In the original text by Vaneigem, it is “power” that is “itself constructed to expropriate each person of his or her skin.”

<sup>15</sup> English in original.

the sleepwalkers who haunt the necropolises of the commodity: at certain moments, they display the same indifference as things do. A precocious senility strikes the slaves of the modern era, who *burn themselves out* following the *blind* race of the economy. How can people not age prematurely, when they don't stop giving in and conforming to what really isn't them? Under the reign of the quantitative, of the repetitive, we only encounter stares that are blank with the same absence as things.

The spectacle "is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity" (Debord). "The number one enemy" of power "is creativity" (Vaneigem). The spontaneity of lived experience appears as "the first hotbed of guerrilla warfare." Also "prohibitions surround lived experience on all sides, pushing it back,<sup>16</sup> encouraging it to change into a role" (Vaneigem). The law of hierarchical power is interiorized as an inquisitorial eye, as a castrating Super-Ego. The forces of Eros are domesticated and perverted. Sometimes men and women manage to steal furtive moments of real life and hasty love affairs. As such moments, each person reunites with him- or herself, with others and with the world. But the police of the unconscious mind stay vigilant and afflict with anxiety the memories of happy breaks from the routine. "The dawn in which embraces are undone is the same as the dawn in which revolutionaries<sup>17</sup> die" (Vaneigem). The shadow of punishment hangs over those who are inclined to make genuine use of their time. The colony of the spectacle is a penal colony.

"Killed slowly in the slaughterhouses of work" (Vaneigem),<sup>18</sup> men and women change faces when they leave to go home, but they are still faces of death.<sup>19</sup> Menaced by the invasion of the Thing,<sup>20</sup> hunted, attacked on all sides and every minute, each person survives in "the rancor of never being oneself" (Vaneigem).

The bourgeoisie is also subjected to the domination of the commodity. By assuring the triumph of the economy, the hierarchs and technocrats of the bourgeoisie became the servants of an autonomous power that is unaware of itself.<sup>21</sup> We can say of the economy what Kant said with respect to art: it is an endless end.<sup>22</sup> This is the era of the *masters-slaves*. The cybernetic programmers are themselves programmed: reified. "The humanity of the master tends towards zero, while the inhumanity of disincarnated power tends towards infinity" (Vaneigem). The bourgeoisie having dedicated itself to "political oblivion," the proletariat becomes the "only aspirant to historical life" (Debord).

---

<sup>16</sup> The phrase *dans un espace trop exigu* ("into too cramped a space") has been dropped by the author.

<sup>17</sup> The author has dropped the phrase *sans révolution* ("without revolution") from the original.

<sup>18</sup> The original text by Vaneigem reads "Those who are killed slowly in the mechanized slaughterhouses of work are also discussing things, singing, drinking, dancing, making love, taking to the streets, taking up arms, inventing a new poetry."

<sup>19</sup> "still faces of death" directly contradicts Vaneigem when he spoke of people "discussing things, singing, drinking, dancing, making love, taking to the streets, taking up arms, inventing a new poetry."

<sup>20</sup> May the reader forgive me for being reminded of the title of the 1951 Sci-Fi film *The Thing*, directed by Christian Nyby.

<sup>21</sup> *Author's note*: the bureaucrats in the East also impose and are subjected to the dictatorship of the economy. The reign of the totalitarian bureaucracy appears as a ruse by the economy that changes the dominant class in order to maintain its domination.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*.

Market society doesn't stop impoverishing life while, at the same time, it abolishes the economic scarcity that previously "necessitated" the sacrifice of that life. "The victory of the autonomous economy must be, at the same time, its defeat" (Debord): it gives birth to the contradictions that will one day make it disappear.

The little deaths of everyday life cause or will cause "a violent and quasi-biological reaction by the will to live" (Vaneigem).<sup>23</sup> Savage critiques of political economy announce the awakening of historical consciousness in a world in which the ideologies of poverty never cease betraying the poverty of the ideologies.

The strength and unity of the divine myth formerly guaranteed the power of feudalism, but the bourgeoisie deconsecrated the world by transforming it: the deicides replaced the divine myth with a multitude of ideological phantoms, ridiculous and precarious, that tried in vain to compensate for the poverty of life. They hardly appear before they have to leave the stage, the spectacle being forced to renew itself ceaselessly. Illusions are changed every day, which one day will dispel "the illusion of change" (Vaneigem). Moreover, getting accustomed to illusory changes revives the desire for real, radical change.

The decline of the barbaric world has begun, with the resurgence of the *negative*. Instead of disappearing, the *negative* will one day become reality in the positivity of a new world.<sup>24</sup>

The will to be itself will be "the absolute weapon" of the proletariat (Vaneigem). The achievement of self in the world will replace the death of self in the Thing. "The logic of desire" will oust "the logic of the commodity" (Vaneigem).

The era of the *masters-slaves* will make way for the era of the *masters without slaves*, who will dominate the totality of their history. The project of the total, unified human being will be part of "generalized self-management," otherwise known as *the poetry made by all*. In fact, this poetry defines itself as the accomplishment of freedom (or creativity) in the world.

After the suffering and the patience of "history in itself" will come "the pleasure of history for itself" (Vaneigem).<sup>25</sup> Lived experience will blossom in a playful and qualitative time, instead of becoming alienated in commodity-time. "Life will recognize itself as pleasure taken in the passage of time" (Debord).<sup>26</sup>

"Generalized self-management" is identified with the democracy of the councils. It is not promised for some distant time, but will be established at the beginning of the revolution.

The power of the councils will be absolute or only mere appearance: it won't tolerate, beyond itself, any power, any hierarchy.

---

<sup>23</sup> In the original text by Vaneigem, it is "the weight of the inauthentic," not "the little deaths of everyday life," that cause this reaction.

<sup>24</sup> It is remarkable that the author produces no concrete examples here, not even the "example" of 1968, which he used to begin this essay.

<sup>25</sup> This phrase only occurs in Vaneigem's essay "Avis aux civilisés relativement à l'autogestion généralisée," published in *Internationale situationniste* #12 (September 1969), and not in *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes generations*.

<sup>26</sup> Debord uses this phrase in a very particular context (Italy during the Renaissance), and not as a generic description of what life will be like after the Revolution: "In the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the art of the festival, life recognized itself as pleasure taken in the passage of time."

The situationists have announced the triumph of subjectivity in history: as Vaneigem notes, this was also Marx's project.