

“A Utopia in the Process of Coming Alive”¹

An interview with Angéline Neveu²

By Jacques Donguy, 30 November 2002

You attended courses by Henri Lefebvre. The situs accused him of plagiarizing their theses.

Twice. I was a philosophy student in Paris and, because sociology was something new, it was a great pleasure to attend Lefebvre’s courses – just to discover new things. The following year, it was as an Enragé, but still without the title.

In 1967.

In 1967, when people were going for other reasons: to sabotage Lefebvre’s classes. He’d returned from Japan, and he was speaking a lot about the restaurants, about sushi. He was right: it is very fashionable food today. In any case, people began to shout, to demand real news from Japan. For us that meant the Zengakuren. *That* was Japan. He hemmed and hawed. But not for a long time – the sabotage . . . There were many people outside, tough guys ready to intervene. And then, in any case, they were verbal interventions . . .

And, concretely, what did you do?

Concretely? We shut him up. He was treated as if he were a liar. To skip over the Zengakuren! I recall that the verbal intervention quieted him, and this was like a silence in the assembly, with everyone turning around: from whence came, everyone, this is what happened, a similar boycott . . . It was quite impressive to see Lefebvre’s defeated look. He didn’t have much to celebrate that day. This didn’t escalate to physical violence.

At the time, Nanterre was surrounded by slums.

At the time. And this isn’t a small detail. Here was a modern city in the middle of slums, with a bourgeois clientele – this was an explosive mixture. It also wasn’t comfortable going to Nanterre. Because there were slums and then, in them, there were Algerians, and you could obviously get kef there, in cubes, at the time. They cut, they weighed, they put this there, no fuss at all. But there were also machineguns . . .

You have spoken to me of a poster: “A current of air on a Japanese apple tree.”

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² A French poet, musician and performer (1946-2011).

The title is a détournement of a painting by Duchamp. It is also the title of a tract by the Enragés of Nanterre – I even think that it was a tract by the 22 March group, if my memory is correct.

And this poster had a détourned comic strip: “As elsewhere, there’re no coincidences. Probability makes them into bonds” and “When we take our desires for reality.”

Desires for reality?! That’s terrific, because it was a fantastic utopia, a utopia that we in fact glimpsed in 1968. We will never again see a moment such as that in the streets, with everyone talking, with no more social barriers, little old men coming to give us oranges when we were on the barricades, song lyrics by Alice Becker-Ho on the walls saying “Live your passions”; all the détournements – it was completely beautiful. Utopia was possible then – we saw it, we lived it. When a bus driver speaks to you about imagination, and not *beefsteak*³ – something has happened in the country.

In fact you weren’t enrolled at Nanterre.

No, no. I was one of the people from outside. What went on there was internal, except for the moment when everyone was there permanently.

Including Pierre Carrère, one of the Enragés. Who was he?

He became a photographer. He was a guy with whom I studied philosophy in Paris. Patrick Négroni⁴ – same thing. We were in the same philosophy class at a school in Paris. On the rue Auguste Comte, across the street from the Frédéric Mitterand cinema. That meant that we crossed the street, changed sidewalks, stopped going to classes and saw four or five films every day, including *Charge of the Light Brigade*, in fact, all of the films that were included as extracts in the film *La société du spectacle*. There was something else to do than go to philosophy classes. Then we went to Nanterre all the time. Plus there were our experiments with *dope*⁵ at the end of the week, which weren’t negotiable. We were very preoccupied, but not with philosophy.

Headquarters [in Nanterre]: the Zimmer. What did you do there? Have meetings? Discussions?

Yes, discussions. And we also went out a lot. The wandering around [*Les dérives*]: they had to start somewhere.

Before Debord? You engaged in dérives before [you met] Debord?

With the Enragés, it is the same as Debord. As soon as you say “Enragés,” it is over: it’s Debord. When there was Sébastiani, when there was Riesel, there were *dérives*. On a *dérive*, you always know where you will begin, but never where you will end up. We had adventures of the sort that we wouldn’t sleep for five days and nights – to see how far we could go.

³ English in original.

⁴ Angéline Neveu’s boyfriend at the time.

⁵ English in original.

“On 22 March” – I’m quoting from Christophe Bourseiller’s book – “an extreme Left militant, Xavier, was arrested. Occupation of the university’s administration building by the anarchists, and the Enragés seize control of the faculty’s boardroom and wreck the furniture. Searching through the drawers, they found alcohol.”

There was no alcohol! We left to go get some. We remained five minutes. When we saw the Cohn-Bendit crew arrive – it was not the 22d, but the evening of the 21 – and they were bored all night, precisely because there was no alcohol, there was nothing. And then there was an anarchist speech by Cohn-Bendit who was absolutely fabulous: he declared that people were stealing glasses. You know – a faculty boardroom is quite dull. There was a sideboard, a big table and chairs and that was all. There were three glasses, and so we got a speech on theft! As an anarchist, as an anarchist leader at that moment, because the roles could be modified at that moment, and he knew very well that the first anarchist law is “It is forbidden to forbid.” Then he forbade us from stealing the three glasses and made us put them on the table. When we saw that, he left.

How many were you?

Eleven.

There were eleven of you.

After that, we took the train, came to the Saint-Lazare train station, and wrote that damned tract, “*Courant d’air sur le pommier du Japon.*”⁶ That was the evening of 21 March. Cohn-Bendit and the others, who had always been in contact with Nanterre, called up their buddies, who arrived on the 22d and called themselves the 22 March Movement, as it was the 22d.

The occupation of Cavaillès hall, the occupation of the Sorbonne – were you there?

Yes, I remember it very well; I was flabbergasted. Because you had to take *breaks*.⁷ It was that intense. Night and day. We didn’t go to sleep, we fell asleep. And I remember it very well. I’d taken a *break*,⁸ I’d left everyone behind, I’d retired to the Sorbonne’s courtyard, and this was a very special moment to be in the shadow of that chapel, because I saw this extraordinary graffiti,

⁶ Printed on the back of a reproduction of Duchamp’s painting *Courant d’air sur le pommier du Japon* (1914), the tract proclaimed: “Ladies and gentleman, Henri Lefebvre, of the most celebrated agents of Recuperation of the last 50 years (one knows how the situationists have already put him in his place – him and the whole *Arguments* gang – in their tract *Aux poubelles de l’Histoire*), has proposed to add the Zengakuren to his bag. The CNRS has its emissaries; Praxis has its heads of research. Lefebvre the meta-philosopher is less stupid than Morin the pata-philosopher. But the meta-Stalinist must have the elegance to shut up, when it is a question of class struggle. A word to the wise is enough.” – Nanterre, 19 March 1968, the Enragés. This text was reproduced in René Viénet, *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations* (Éditions Gallimard, October 1968).

⁷ English in original.

⁸ English in original.

tranquilly, all alone. “How can we think freely in the shadow of a chapel?” And then, when I was lost in my thoughts, some people brought out a grand piano and began to play it in the courtyard of the Sorbonne. It was completely beautiful. With the graffiti on the canvas by Philippe de Champaigne . . . Aesthetically, I find that many [similar] things took place. It was another point of view, especially a posteriori. There were very strong moments, moments that I will never forget. I have forgotten the tracts, but not that, because there were emotions in the aesthetic content.

At Cavallès Hall, did Debord intervene?

I don’t know, [but] I saw them in the hall. The well-known photo of Debord: Debord in the middle of everyone. That’s when Sébastiani appeared. Because Sébastiani, who wasn’t an Enragé or anything else, intervened in the general assembly and Khayati . . . There you go. I find that this summarizes the basis of their determination and respective positions. In other words, at a given moment, Cohn-Bendit, the Trotskyists, the Maoists and the Leftists said, “Down with the Police State!” Everyone agreed with that. Sébastiani rose and said, “Down with the State!” Now, that’s obviously not the same program. Khayati was excited by this . . . Sébastiani was discovered and he became a situ. And so, reflecting on it, I think that this, finally, was truly the fundamental rift between Sébastiani and the others.

On 16 May, the Enragés, who headed the Occupation Committee led a fierce war against the Extreme Left groups. Were there factional struggles between the Enragés and the Extreme Left?

There were fights! It was dangerous, physical. But it didn’t hurt badly. Because, at that moment everything was possible. In any case, we believed so. A utopia that was in the process of coming alive . . .

A seizure of power?

No, it was “Down with the State!” If it was “Down with the State!” there would no power at all. No one speaks of that.

You’ve spoken to me of a dérive with Debord, a meeting at a bar at the Palais Royal. After May 1968.

Yes, but that one – I remember a magnificent wine bar. Because Debord really loved . . .

A wine bar at the Palais Royal?

I should know. There was a wine bar – I insist – in the grand tradition and very very beautiful, because – obviously – [it was] the Palais Royal.

How many of you were there in his bar? In one big group?

You know – I’ve never taken note of such things. I have the impression that it was, although always the same people.

You started to drink and . . .

Ah, yes, and then afterwards we continued. But where?

This lasted how long – 48 hours? 24 hours? three days?

There was no end. Because, in addition, very often, when you start a *dérive* – for example, you go to his place or her place when available, you sleep for an hour or two, and then you go out again. Furthermore, there are other people there who aren't sleeping at that moment, who are doing other things, but there's time to "rest" for an hour or two. Not much, though.

So there was a circuit of bars you knew . . .

And those we didn't know, too. At the time – and this is very, very important – les Halles in Paris still existed.

And cafés that were open all night . . .

All night. The closure of the cafés took place after 1968, certainly. And here you can imagine the night – you can eat for nothing, go from one bar to another, stroll around, but in our neighborhood, it wouldn't do [*dans donne ceci*]. It created trouble. It was the dissolution of the SI!

So, you intervened in the discussion.

That's it – I intervened and I wrote a text that I tore up. You see, there was the Milan business,⁹ reported by I don't know who . . . There was a *mix-up*.¹⁰

A trial, in Paris.

A Stalinist trial. I was accused of all the evils of the world. I got out of there, I was appalled, I cried like a baby in the subway. I didn't understand – I truly didn't understand what they were accusing me of. They thought they were different. This got out of control at the end. And, furthermore, this helped Debord put an end to the International. Because, above all, he was the only one who wrote everything [for *Internationale situationniste*]. It became the Bible of the intellectuals. No one thought without having read Debord [first]. In all of Paris, basically, a whole way of life had completely disappeared. We weren't the only ones who lived it. Except that it no longer existed. It was the end of an era.

There was the episode of the ripped-up text in Milan with Paolo Salvadori. Who was also a situationist.

⁹ July 1970. Cf. Miguel Amorós, "A Brief History of the Italian Section of the Situationist International": <http://www.notbored.org/prologue.pdf>.

¹⁰ English in original.

Yes, a philosopher of education. Originally from Bergamo.

And so it was a political text that you'd written.

Political and philosophical. Here again, it was a question of an internal conflict in the Italian section.

Between two members?

Yes, the two remaining members. Because the others . . . Debord had created the practice of exclusion, but [used it] with a frantic frequency, where each one in his ego excluded the others.

And so, your text – you no longer remember its title?

No. But it was a substantial text. Two to three pages long, something like that. It truly followed an inspiration generated by the conflict – the conflict between Salvadori and Sanguinetti. And then everybody went their separate ways.

Was this the episode at the Taverne? Patrick Negroni was summoned to appear at the Taverne du Regent, on the place de Clichy. Christian Sébastiani and Pierre Lotrou conducted the trial of Angéline Neveu, the young woman who caused trouble at a situationist conference.

It's because it was Salvadori and Sanguinetti who had a two-person conference.¹¹ I was there – so perhaps there were three of us. But I created trouble, that's like . . . In fact, we can no longer say anything at the end of a moment, because if we take the theories to their [logical] conclusions, take them to their conclusions – well, there it is.¹²

Debord – it was in 1974 that he dissolved¹³ –

Yes, but this lasted, all these stories. Me, I always say “68, May 68: it was a month that lasted eight years.”

“She is a manipulator. She wants to explode the SI. She is banned from frequentation.”

But who said this? Banned from what? I belonged to nothing. I refused to join the SI.

They proposed it?

Oh, yes. They proposed that all the Enragés join the SI in 1968.

¹¹ Circa July 1970.

¹² The French here is *parce que si tu prenais les théories jusqu'au bout, là, menez-la jusqu'au bout, la théorie, voilà, ça.*

¹³ The SI was in fact dissolved in 1972

Why did you refuse?

Because I didn't have the culture to fight in defense of poetry and art. You know, the famous slogan "Art is dead" – at the age of 20, I didn't know it. But I was completely impressed. The context must be established: Debord had such an aura, you know, yet it was still a secret. Me, I've known ten people in as many years. It had been my social milieu before I moved on. It was a kind of constant fear. And when Debord said, "Art is dead," afterwards, obviously, we knew that it was a détournement of Schwitters' "Petit bourgeois art is dead." This didn't give me more weight – I said "No, there is something wrong here. But if you do not want to discuss it, I will not become engaged in something that I cannot discuss." So I remained in the background. In any case, Sébastiani, before going to each meeting, was scared to death. The SI was Debord, Vaneigem and Khayati. We were the Enragés of Nanterre; we will always be the last generation. *La société du spectacle* and the SI's journal – it was Debord who wrote it all. Sébastiani was the last poet who never wrote a line. Virtually none of the Enragés wrote anything.