

The Progress of Submission Moves at a Frightening Speed: From Situationism to the Peasants' Confederation, a Thinker of Radicalism

An interview with René Riesel¹

“Former member of the Situationist International, 51-year-old René Riesel breeds sheep on the Méjean plateau in Lozère. At the age of 17 he belonged the Nanterre ‘Enragés,’ then to the Occupation Committee at the Odéon in May ’68. The ‘situs’ would recognize him as one of their own, the youngest and also the most promising of them all according to Guy Debord, before expelling him like almost all the others. The very image of the urban rebel, Riesel became one of the *éminences grises* of the Peasants’ Confederation. Then, at variance with them, he left it in 1999. He did not, however, give up fighting.”

Libération: In 1988, in his *Commentaries on The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord wrote: “There is no longer any opposition.”² For many this signified the annihilation of the idea of radical revolution. Do you share this assessment?

René Riesel: I’ll leave to the sophisticated and university-based Debordists their endless glosses of Debord. A lot of people, notably in the media and the [government] ministries, believed they found in him a master thinker and, late in life, he no doubt let himself be taken for one. I know what I owe to Debord but, rather than re-read him a hundred times, I prefer to observe the world as it is today. Nevertheless, to return to this idea of the absence of radical opposition to market society, it would also be necessary to say how the theory formulated by the situationists has become obsolete. To affirm that there is no longer opposition, without saying that, in any case, it is no longer on the basis of this theory that one could reorganize one, or even only to think about the possibility of one, this is only an imposture, a kind of pirouette, a gambit of personal poker, and in this Debord was not the most maladroit, with the result that it only remained for him to

¹ “Les progrès de la soumission vont à une vitesse effroyable: Du situationnisme à la Confédération paysanne, un penseur de la radicalité,” interview conducted by Alain Leauthier. Published in *Libération*, 3-4 February 2001. Translated by Bill Brown and uploaded to the *NOT BORED!* website (notbored.org) in 2007.

² In point of fact, Guy Debord does not say anything of the sort in his *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*. In Chapter XXVII, Debord merely quotes a passage from Thucydides’ *The Peloponnesian War* (Book VIII, Chapter 5) – “No opposition manifested itself among the remainder of the citizens, who were frightened by the number of conspirators” – which Debord introduces with the suggestion that this is “something that has relevance to the situation in which we find ourselves today.”

write his *Panegyric*, the aestheticization of his life, considered as a work of art.³ Debord enclosed himself in an obsessive and sterile conspiracy theory for at least half of the *Commentaries* and, obviously, this manner of reducing everything to the decoy fascinated the professionals of lying. People in the media and power recognized themselves in it and found in it their unsurpassable horizon. But history continued elsewhere, and it would have been more serious and fruitful to analyze the material conditions that rendered opposition so difficult, to explain why we are witnessing the development of a truly terrifying taste for submission.

Libération: Shortly after your expulsion from the Situationist International,⁴ you left for the countryside and, in 1995, you reappeared as the National Secretary of the Peasants' Confederation, José Bové's organization. In your eyes, how did this organization incarnate the promise of a new radicalism?

René Riesel: I left for the Eastern Pyrenees and became a breeder [of sheep], a way of life that suited me and allowed me to reconstitute a "rear base," not in the military sense, but in the sense of re-learning the practices that in many respects constitute the real wealth of humanity. In the current state of the decay of our societies, we must re-invest in a certain number of lost practices. We know the classic jokes about the kid who asks if fish are square because he has only seen them in the form of frozen breaded blocks, about 40-year-old people who do not know a cow's front from its back: this state of tragic ignorance becomes widespread. But faced with the kind of panic that seizes people faced with the abyss, some people try to reassure them with a return to pseudo-rural traditions, which would be a possible refuge for quality in agricultural products, whereas in reality they only liberates the inventiveness of advertising to refurbish the same industrial shit. I have seen things deteriorate at a lively pace. There is no longer a peasantry⁵ in France, only farmers who are more or less integrated – whether they admit it or not – into a segment of agro-industrial production. And, contrary to what the Peasants' Confederation ceaselessly cries out, the industrialization of agriculture does not necessarily translate into the concentration of cultivation.

Libération: Why be allied with the Confederation if its project seemed so false to you?

René Riesel: The industrialization of the breeding of sheep was the dominant trend and, as a breeder, I practiced exactly the opposite. It would have taken the devil to disengage me from it. In 1991, the people from the local Confederation sought me out and, with them, I was enticed to slightly widen the fight. The Confederation brings together socialists, hippies, repented Leftists, Greens – a club of quite paradoxical ideas that functions according to a kind of consensus that presents a unified facade, with all sorts of tendencies that coexisted without ever coming to a head in their discussions. . . . I believed I could move forward on questions that were central for me. Many of these people were or are truly of good faith. There were things to do on this terrain; but I never renounced anything, I always said what I thought about the functioning of the

³ This phrasing suggests that, rather than showing that Debord lived his life the way artists create works of art, *Panegyric* (1989) was an attempt – after the fact – to make a work of art out of his life.

⁴ A member of the Sisyphus anarchist group (with Christian Sébastiani) in 1967 and active in the occupations movement of May 1968, Riesel joined the SI at the age of 16 in June 1968. One of the "contemplative" situationists, Riesel was excluded from the organization in September 1971.

⁵ Note that in his translation of this interview, Tom McDonough doesn't render *paysannerie* as peasantry, preferring "farmers" instead.

organization, about the illusions that were widespread in it. But OK, I did what I could do (against GMOs,⁶ in particular), and I left in March 1999, when nothing more was possible.

Libération: Can you explain how the development of the peasantry and questions tied to genetic engineering constitute in your eyes fundamental questions that open up the possibility of re-founding a critical theory?

René Riesel: As a breeder, I have seen up-close the end of the *blitzkrieg* that victimized the rural and agricultural world in the developed countries. Peasant civilization, or at least what remained of it, has been broken. Traditional peasantry was certainly not the carrier of marvelous values to be preserved at all costs; it simply conserved a living memory that permitted people to follow other routes than those imposed by industrial development. People found in it attitudes concerning life and especially social life that were quite antithetical to the dominant rationalism, a way of life, in any case, less separated off than what industrialization has ended up as, by reducing humanity to work and then colonizing free time. I have seen the old rural society [become] liquefied, rot on the spot, its behaviors stiffened. We cannot be content with the simplifications of the anti-globalists, with the image of the wicked transnationals that one substitutes for the 200 families and the capitalists in top-hats and [smoking] big cigars so as to have a clearly identifiable enemy, whereas domination essentially functions thanks to submission, submission to industrialization, to the control of a technological system.

Libération: . . . which too few people, in your opinion, critique fundamentally.

René Riesel: My critique is not of the Heideggerian type and does not aim at technique as such. But it is quite necessary to grasp the stakes of the industrialization of agriculture, which reaches a final stage with genetic chimeras: it is a question, neither more nor less, of an attempt to definitively supplant nature (outside and inside humanity), to eliminate this last resistance to the domination of technological rationalism. A “reason” that wants to ignore – and here practically eliminate – whatever is not part of it, is, I believe, the minimum definition of the delirium. If we comprehend these stakes, then we must totally question the very bases of the current agricultural system. Now, what do we see? A pseudo-contestation that appeals to the interventionist State to maintain and moralize the markets, to assure the existence of farmers, while the overt project of these States is to eliminate them, as in Great Britain, where the peasantry is only 1 to 2% of the total population. Today there is a project, apparently progressive, aiming at integrating the farmer into an arrangement in which he is an agent of the State, which is a totally bureaucratic model, the historical sources of which one sees quite well. As a result, we can better understand the links between diverse movements such as Attac⁷ and the Peasants’ Confederation. They are all attempting to restore the party of the historically vanquished, that is to say, the partisans of the State, who in their own eyes have been defeated – the sovereignty of the States crumbles – but do not despair at re-founding one that, this time, would be “truly of the citizenry.”

Libération: You participated, with Indian peasants, in the sabotage of transgenic rice at a CIRAD⁸ lab. Must we see in this “direct action,” to use your own vocabulary, a sign of the renewal of the radical critique of the world?

⁶ Genetically modified organisms.

⁷ Founded in 1998, Attac is the “Association for the Taxation of Transactions for the Aid of Citizens.” The transactions to be taxed would be those involving foreign currency exchanges.

⁸ Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (“The Center for International Cooperation in Agronomic Research for Development”).

René Riesel: The important word is “direct” rather than “action.” Young rebels today often describe themselves as “activists,” as in old Leftist politics, except that now this is played out in front of the cameras of the media, which are very fond of this supposed “new radicalism.” Radicalism is literally “to grasp things by their roots,” and not refreshing a summary anticapitalism that is livened up with *bourdieuseries*.⁹ The “Left of the Left,” this mix of citizens’ groups, partisans of the Tobin tax,¹⁰ anti-globalists and third-worlders, more or less manipulated by the old Trotskyist general staffs, what does it demand? More from the State. The most aware of these young “activists” admit that there is theoretical work to be done and that we cannot use old ideas available on the [intellectual] market as a kit, nor hang on to the wagon of what might appear to be the most accomplished expression of the old critical movement at the end of the 1960s: situationist theory. To grasp things at their roots means to criticize the techno-scientific bases of modern society, to understand the profound ideological relationship between political or social progressivism (that is to say, the “Leftist mentality” as Theodore Kaczynski defined it)¹¹ and scientific progressivism. Ever since the “industrial revolution” in England, industrialization has been an absolutely fundamental rupture with the essence of the progress of humanization. As we say today, without peasant civilization, it is civilization itself that is unraveling. And the historical meaning of industrialization, its profound truth, which has become manifest in the 20th century, is destruction: Auschwitz and Hiroshima are the two baptismal fonts on which the contemporary era has been supported.

Libération: You re-think your critical approach starting from your ties to nature. But what about the town, the riots, the various questionings of sacrosanct “respect”? How do you analyze the urban violence of today?

René Riesel: Back then, the quite widespread ideological pretension was “wanting everything and [wanting it] now,” preferring to ignore, among other things, what everyone knew, that is to say, that life and humanization are a fight, in any case a process in which nothing is obtained without effort. Today the absence of effort, the instantaneity permitted by machines, by informatics, is exactly what our society worships. As for the urban “barbarians” that this society secretes, because it cannot do anything else but also because, up to a certain point, they are useful as a foil to it, they reproduce the market system in their own way, they translate its lack of perspectives through their nihilism, like the kids raised on the computer and the Internet: they are, furthermore, sometimes the same. There is a complete psychological deconstruction, a complete subjugation to the machine.

Libération: Despite this gloomy picture, for the past few years you have been speaking out, you have been writing, in short, you express yourself anew concerning the idea of revolution.

⁹ In other words, commonplaces found in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu. In English, see, for example, *The Bachelors’ Ball: The Crisis of Peasant Society in Béarn* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Named after the economist James Tobin, the Tobin tax is designed to penalize short-term speculation on currency exchange.

¹¹ Kaczynski’s *Industrial Society and Its Future* was translated into French and published by the *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* (“Encyclopedia of Nuisances”), a journal and publishing house founded by Jaime Semprun and the ex-situationist Christian Sébastiani. The EdN also published Riesel’s book *Déclarations sur l’agriculture transgénique et ceux qui prétendent s’y opposer* (“Declarations on Transgenic Agriculture and on Those Who Claim to Oppose It”) in 2000.

René Riesel: On February 8th [2001] I will go on trial in Montpellier for the action against CIRAD. This will be the occasion to demonstrate the existence of a critical, anti-industrial current. But soberly: spectacular activism does not interest me, especially when it hides the poverty of its analysis. My critique of techno-science is actually radical: public research, private research, it hardly matters when these people literally do not know what they're doing, puttering around – without having, by their own admission, the least theoretical comprehension – with genetic chimeras with unforeseeable effects. The sabotage against CIRAD was a frontal attack against public research, in order to shatter the myth that citizen-controlled research can be regulated: we must begin to understand that this technology is essentially uncontrollable. The famous “precautionary principle”¹² of which one speaks so much – we apply it, in the only manner in which it can be applied.

Libération: Is it still necessary to wager of revolution?

René Riesel: The progress of submission moves at an absolutely frightful speed. Through the Internet and every other artifice of technological hardware, industrial “culture” is spreading everywhere. Our time is limited, because the old idea that capitalism or the economy will collapse under their [own] contradictions is obviously false. Our fate is in our hands: it is a matter of renewing the historical process of humanization.

¹² The idea that, in the absence of scientific consensus that an action or policy will cause serious harm to the general public, the burden of proof of the safety of such an action or policy falls upon those who advocate taking or enacting it.