

# Report to the 7<sup>th</sup> Conference of the SI: On the principal character of our collective activity<sup>1</sup>

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The theory of the SI is clear on at least one point: *one must make use of it*. Already presenting itself as a collective platform, and truly only having meaning in the perspective of a vast collective enlargement of our critique, this theory obligates us to respond to this question: If we are grouped together, what should we actually be *doing*? This question is posed quite concretely and, because the entirety of the SI's theories, being the complete opposite of intellectual specialization, covers a very large complex of elements of unequal importance, and *especially* because the origin of the agreement between us is simply theoretical, its entire reality ultimately depends on the manner in which we conceive and undertake the usage of that theory. What must this collective activity be for ourselves and for the others? This question is one and the same. A bad response, namely that we have an immediate grasp of the totality, and that this grasp is already a total, qualitative attitude that has allowed us to discourse superbly about everything, would obviously be a pre-Hegelian manifestation of idealism, because such a conception lacks *the seriousness and the work of the negative*. Our activity cannot be absolute, a night in which all the cows are radically black, that is to say, a [*state of*] *repose*. It is within the same [overall] movement that our collective comprehension can remain partially inactive and that our individual activities can remain partially misunderstood by those who accommodate themselves to them. If we do not have a correct judgment about the SI, we will be proportionately wrong about everything else.<sup>2</sup> Thus we must (1) reach an agreement concerning the principal character of our current collective activity and for the period that lies before us; (2) reach an agreement on the fact that this is a matter of an agreement concerning *practical activity* and to construct it completely, given that practical relations correct themselves through experience; and (3) with respect to this effective collective practice, and *concerning it alone*, we must situate all particular [individual] activity according to only two criteria: either it is incompatible with our collective activity (which obviously includes the comprehension of this very activity, our theory) and, in such a case, to draw all the relevant conclusions; or it lies within the domain of individual liberty, which *cannot interest us* from the point of view of the degree of collective activity

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, "Rapport à la VII<sup>th</sup> Conference de l'I.S.: Sur le caractère principal de notre activité commune," presented in Paris between 5 and 11 July 1966. Excerpts published in *La véritable scission dans l'Internationale: Circulaire publique de l'Internationale Situationniste* (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1972), which did not include this text's subtitle or its division into numbered sections. Translations of these excerpts were published in *The Veritable Split in the International: Public Circular of the Situationist International* (London: B.M. Piranha, 1974), reprinted with corrections by Chronos Publications (London, 1990), and in *The Real Split in the Situationist International: Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), neither of which is satisfactory: the former is overly literal and reads poorly in English; the latter is way too loose in its renderings. The current translation, completed by Bill Brown on 28 December 2024, using the original typescript of Debord's text, is the first fully complete and accurate one.

<sup>2</sup> Begin passage not included in the excerpted texts.

effectively realized in existing conditions.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, we must not collectively trouble ourselves with individual questions that are outside our collective activity and, likewise, none of us should trouble ourselves in our individual lives with the SI's collective *pretensions* that would be beyond concrete collective practice. I mean to say that the existence of these abstract collective positions must not serve to either embellish such particular [individual] inactivity or to encumber the effective lives of any of us. This of course presupposes that there is in fact effective participation in a concrete collective activity. It is only this *practical* activity that is the judgment that we recognize amongst ourselves, just as it is this activity that grounds and justifies our objective judgment by others.

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It is certain that our collective activity must be widened. I simply propose to look at this activity, which, as practical activity, is impoverished. We must admit its limits and its poverty precisely in order to enlarge it practically. On the other hand, it is because this activity is not judged *practically* that it can appear grandiose. But such a grandiose character will be refuted as soon as a certain thoughtless practice of inactive relationships takes root among us. I thus believe that we literally need not be together independently of an activity that is defined by our collective program (and that better defines it). This activity is itself determined by our place in the world, which we must occupy as a critique of the contemporary world and as the *encounter* of the critical elements that appear within it.

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Here I am taking account of several discussions that have taken place among us, fragmentarily, during the last few months. I am also taking account of several individual uncertainties that have sometimes manifested a kind of disarmament when faced with the problems of the *practical application* of what we have quite easily affirmed together. Two parallel positions have more or less clearly arisen from this situation, which should be clarified immediately: (1) a pseudo-critique of the SI that expresses an unacceptable dissatisfaction with the fact that the SI has not magically transfigured all aspects of the lives of those who have encountered it. The young man of letters François George is a good example of this, reproaching us for its deficiencies;<sup>4</sup> and (2) a false praise of the SI, which I judge to be far worse because it already contains a kind of ideology of *an illusory power*. It tries to make it believed that the SI, from the moment that it came into "existence," *was already everything that it could be in fact* (coherence, etc.). Such an illusion can involve, as a corollary, extravagant illusions about what the SI must become in the future, as a [logical] development from the imaginary basis with which one currently credits it. This praise and this denigration – one leads to the other – are two faces of the same coin: incomprehension and absence with respect to the conditions of our actual activity and the activity that is currently possible.

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<sup>3</sup> End passage not included in the excerpted texts.

<sup>4</sup> See "Sur deux livres et leurs auteurs," in *Internationale situationniste* #10 (March 1966).

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It is the weakness and primitive character of the new aspects of class struggle in modern society that can produce around us, and even among us, neo-idealist hopes for an intellectual apocalypse with respect to the SI as it concretely exists and, necessarily, disappointments as a result, arising from the same expectations. Only the development of this struggle will transform the real problems, and the *false problems*, as well.

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Our concern is above all to establish a global critical theory (and thus inseparably) to *communicate* it to all those sectors that are already objectively engaged in a negation that remains subjectively fragmentary. The definition of, experimentation with and long-term work upon this question of *communication* are our real principal activities as an organized group. The deficiencies of *those activities* sum up *all* our deficiencies (as a group). The rest is just idle chatter.<sup>5</sup>

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The tendency to elevate and purify theories and book-knowledge is an obvious flight from the practical problem, which is currently the mediation of all the other problems, including the real theoretical ones, which are legion. The pursuit of this tendency can only lead to [the formation of] a philosophical school that is devoted to an ideology of revolution in everyday life, but is in fact closed off from both everyday life and real subversion. It is too late in the century for the founding of such a school. If it didn't finally prostitute itself in a kind of super-Nashism,<sup>6</sup> such a school would naturally remain without a following, due to its internal contradictions and the logic of spectacular culture (the conspiracy of silence).<sup>7</sup> The tendency towards "theoreticians" would, by the way, remain impoverished, even in its theories.<sup>8</sup> We are not concerned with the theoretical guarantee of classical German thinking, but with revolt in real life today and for us, who are led to conjoin in our understanding the critical culture that existed at the time of Marx (for example: modern poetry as the self-negation of art) and all the forms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which we must critique concretely, beyond making simple denunciations of commodity advertising.

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The full participation in what I call our principal activity at the current stage obviously presupposes, and reinforces, the abilities of individuals in both their theoretical awareness and their uses of life. Nevertheless, in no way would we be justified in setting as *our collective task* a

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<sup>5</sup> Begin passage not included in the excerpted texts.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. "L'opération contre-situationniste dans divers pays," *Internationale situationniste* #8 (January 1963).

<sup>7</sup> That was how the SI was first received by its contemporaries in the worlds of art and politics: deliberate and complete silence.

<sup>8</sup> End passage not included in the excerpted texts.

refined study of pure theoretical problems, because our *theory of dialogue* cannot be satisfied with a simple *dialogue of theory*: from its origin to its final form, the theory of dialogue is a critique of society.

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Contrary to what some people appear to believe, *it isn't so difficult to understand us theoretically*, once people are in contact with us, once they, like us, are brought to confront the realities of which we speak. It isn't *obligatory* to reread Machiavelli and Kautsky. It must be easier to understand us today than, for example, five years ago,<sup>9</sup> when the first elaboration of the SI was more fragmentary and confused, and especially because the events that supported our conclusions were themselves only known to the avant-garde, difficult to evaluate and communicate. Today, on the contrary, these events – ever since the revolts in Berkeley<sup>10</sup> and Amsterdam,<sup>11</sup> and up to and including the various [violent] responses to urbanism – take place in the streets, and thus in the newspapers.<sup>12</sup> Thus, what is difficult isn't so much attaining a fine understanding of the SI's theories, but *doing something with them*, even crudely. It is this difficulty that must occupy us above all else.

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The SI must take care to no longer sing its own praises. We must stop the development, among us and around us, of an admiring contentment that is founded on what we've done in the past (we admit that this is both a lot and very little), and to envision, on the contrary, how can *make use* of that past today. And of the practical *abilities* of the people who approach us. If we have defended the title of "situationist" by different means, such as exclusion from the group, this has solely been to prevent it from being "valorized" *against us*. It hasn't been undertaken with the goal of valorizing it for ourselves. We must recall on which movement to come we are betting.

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The multifaceted activity (theoretical and practical) that proceeds from the central point of advanced revolutionary *communication*, understood in the widest sense of the word, is what can, by itself, decide the manner in which the situationists form a group, as well as all the criteria that allow us to judge the coherence and abilities of our potential comrades. Please consider that there is hardly any personal characteristic, even when it comes to the most "subjective" tastes and attitudes, that doesn't have a directly measurable effect *on the terrain of our communication with the outside*. It is here, for example, that a lack of talent in expression appears as a dangerous stammering or as the spreading of partial truths that become lies. It is here that the conformist comportment of one of us in any aspect of his or her life can certainly serve to discredit all the SI's theoretical pretensions, and this can take place even more quickly if such pretensions have the most trenchant appearance. We must be *at least* at the level of the emancipation that is

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<sup>9</sup> Begin passage not included in the excerpted texts.

<sup>10</sup> An allusion to the Free Speech Movement, Berkeley, California (1965).

<sup>11</sup> An allusion to the strikes and riots in Amsterdam (1966).

<sup>12</sup> End passage not included in the excerpted texts.

beginning to appear just about everywhere without [the presence of] theoretical awareness and that only has a theoretical awareness *on top of that emancipation*. It is also obvious that, just as we must refuse to accept “prestigious roles” in the SI, we must reject anyone who presents, among us or to the outside, the opposite of prestige: that is to say, *insufficiency* with respect to our declared and collectively agreed upon bases.

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It has recently been said that the situationists cannot recognize any “retired thinkers” in their ranks. This is completely true, because such a situation would transform us into an intellectual guild devoted to the distribution and recognition of our “masterpieces” and the fixed doctrine that could be deduced from them and then taught to others. Nevertheless, I believe that this warning participates in a kind of glorious utopianism if we position it as the principal peril we currently face. First of all, because the greater risk is becoming an organization of “thinkers still in the cradle” (which wouldn’t be a bad thing on the condition that they quickly leave the cradle behind). But I must insist that we especially have no need of “thinkers” of any sort, that is to say, people producing theories outside of practical life. To the extent that our theories in the process of formation appear to me as correct as possible, for the moment and in the conditions that we face, I admit that any theoretical development that can come within the scope of the coherence of “situationist discourse” *comes from practical life*, that is to say, legitimately flows from it. But this isn’t sufficient on its own. Theoretical formulations must *be applied to practical life*; if they are not, they aren’t worth 15 minutes of our time. Two points should be considered: (1) the visible concordance, to the fullest extent of what is concretely feasible, between the theory and the life of its author; and (2) the utilization of this theory insofar as it is communicable to the forces that are concretely engaged in the search for that theory (there where “reality seeks its theory,” in the words of a classic formulation). Deficiency in the first instance clearly reveals a thoughtless ideologue who is in disagreement with him- or herself; deficiency in the second instance reveals a utopian sect in which there is certainly a real agreement between the participants, but solely between them. For us, the circumstances are aggravated by the facts that we proclaim the necessity of the historical refusal of ideology and the surpassing of any utopianism by the *effective* possibilities of the present. In both cases, the extent of the realizable, and thus its deficiencies, can quite easily be established – and enlarged – by the actual practice of the situationists if they apply the basic banalities that they have already laid out.<sup>13</sup>

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Any vague contentment with the SI – any contentment that *does not come from concrete action* – is opposed at all levels to the activities that are possible in the future. But the first instance in which this kind of contented pride is opposed to action obviously takes place when the people who encounter us are pushed aside because of a sectarian attitude expressed by former combatants who gloriously retired before they were actual combatants.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Begin passage not included in the excerpted texts.

<sup>14</sup> End passage not included in the excerpted texts.

I also reject the contentment or the threat of discontent with respect to the SI that manifests itself concerning the requirement that we must in some way be the organizers of *holidays*. We have no reason to respond to such a demand for *particular festivals*. We must leave this dimension to individual situationists, that is to say, to not hamper anyone with a collectivism that, when it comes to things like this, would necessarily be idiotic. What we must inherit from modern art, in the present conditions, is a deeper level of communication and not a pretention to enjoy some kind of sub-aesthetic pleasure.<sup>15</sup>

When it comes to the question of “limited play,” we must see the conditions with which we are faced. The choices that the SI has made until now have involved a certain selectivity concerning participants. This selectivity has produced good results *in terms of theoretical abilities* and a radical affirmation [of our theses]. But this selectivity will, ultimately, only be good in its practical results and these results cannot, in any case, be good according to any other criteria than selection on the basis of *their presuppositions* (radical theoretical comprehension). It would be unwelcome if the comrades whom we now encounter both approve of our prior choices by approving of us and focus on certain objectives of our past experiences that those choices have had to push into the background. We can certainly have better material means (many of our old friends have done so, on their account) and thus emerge a bit from the poverty that prevents us from speaking seriously about experimental constructions in some separated framework. But we have refused the price of this part of “realization,” and that price was clearly a definitive limitation of our [overall] project. The members of the SI, having chosen a route, have been chosen by it. Without shying away from the problem of the “art” to be realized, we are completely outside of the social basis of activity of the contemporary artists.<sup>16</sup> We must manage to recapture this word [“art”], which is in the culture at large, but not its “prestige” or any kind of consequence of that prestige. (We must defend ourselves against the “prestigious roles” that can come from membership in the SI, the miserable genres of “master thinker” and “master liver,” by systematically undermining every prestige-seeking attitude.) The search for a kind of festivity within the SI will only end up in the trivial practice of entertainment in society, which is certainly not a bad thing in itself, but which would be bad for us because it is dressed up in the ideology of playfulness, that is to say, an attempt at collective play *without its proper means*, but worsened by a kind of doctrine of playfulness. Where are all its means of realization, now and in the future? Exactly in our communication with “the real movement that suppresses existing conditions.” Lacking that, why would even a meeting of the situationists, in such conditions of abstract ponderousness, be entertaining?

Despite the alienation of everyday life, the possibilities for passion and games are quite real, and it seems to me that the SI would commit a clumsy misreading by letting it be understood that life is totally reified outside of situationist activity (which would be a mystical rescue by the concept – witness the people who approach us and have this impression). On the contrary, it seems to me that this open field [*champ libre*] is more often than not outside of our

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<sup>15</sup> Begin passage not included in the excerpted texts.

<sup>16</sup> End passage not included in the excerpted texts.

collective activity, which implies a certain fatigue. This appears even more obvious to me when we consider the personal theoretical work that participation in the situationist project can lead some people to undertake.

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The development of situationist theory has – through an infinity of interactions, in which the various instances of spectacular plagiarism are only an amusing anecdotal aspect – proceeded alongside the development of the dominant cultural world itself. The idea of unitary urbanism and experiments with *dérives* must today be understood in the context of their *struggle* against the modern forms of utopian architecture, the Venice Biennales and the *happenings*.<sup>17</sup> Just as our possible use of “communication that contains its own critique” must fight against recuperated neo-Dadaism or neo-aesthetic combinations (a “Groupe d’Art Visuel”<sup>18</sup> constructs situations in the streets of Paris, etc.). And yet the fact that several attempts at recuperating the SI en bloc into the cultural world have been defeated justifies the first *moments* of our experience: we have followed the possibility of radicalization that they contain. This is why the movement of supersession of which we speak hasn’t suppressed them. It is because of these very experiences – which will be pursued further in the future – that the task of the *communication* of our theory, which I conceive as our principal practical link, has nothing to do with political activism, but is radically the enemy of all the relics of specialist-dominated activism. Nevertheless, the only position that totally discredits the necessary critique of the specialists is *inactivity in the name of the totality*, of which I spoke at the beginning of this text.

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The question of the communication of a theory in the process of formation to radical currents that are themselves in the process of formation (communication that can in no way be unilateral) derives from both “political experience” (organization, police repression) and formal experience with language (from the critique of the dictionary to the use of books, tracts, journals, cinema and speech in everyday life). Immediately afterwards, but not insignificantly, the problem of financing arises. The problem of maintaining some kind of material comfort is, I suppose, decidedly insignificant for all of us. It is certain that where we begin to succeed at communicating what we want to say, the results can come back to us in various uncomfortable forms, like the bomb at Martin’s place.<sup>19</sup> But the least insignificant problem of all is that of our ability, on diverse occasions, to judge the concrete possibilities. Our emissary in Algeria, for example, has recently come to some very optimistic conclusions concerning our possibilities for forming an organization devoted to distribution, without which the best analyses are only good for being offered directly to the International Institute of Social History.<sup>20</sup> What has happened since then has shown that he was too enthusiastic. The conditions of clandestinity, naturally, reduce to a very small number of individuals those whom one can take into one’s confidence. According to what they will or will not do, one can achieve results or nothing at all. But you

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<sup>17</sup> English in original.

<sup>18</sup> Active between 1960 and 1968.

<sup>19</sup> See “L’I.S et les incidents de Randers,” *Internationale situationniste* #10 (March 1966).

<sup>20</sup> Located in Amsterdam, the International Institute for Social History was founded in 1935.

know how the affair is presented *everywhere*, and this is why, by the way, I find this instance of conspiracy to be interesting.<sup>21</sup> The entire world is, for us, like this Algeria, in which everything depends on what we can do with the first people who come along and in which we must all be increasingly capable of judging concretely and creating conditions for such encounters. We do not have the *mass media*<sup>22</sup> at our disposal, and no radical current will for a long time to come. We must learn to recognize and borrow other means of communication *at any moment*.

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If we have a certain theoretical advantage at the moment, this is the unfortunate product of the complete absence of any other practical critique of society in the era that we are leaving behind and its subsequent theoretical dissolution. But since it seems that the reappearance of struggle under new forms begins to confirm our fundamental hypotheses, we have to make known our positions to the new currents that seek to find themselves in politics and in culture, to the extent that we are *their own unknown theory*. To me, this task defines all our current activity and, inversely, nothing can be truly defined beyond it. Because it is no longer a question of claiming a monopoly on critical excellence in any particular domain, we must no longer conceptualize things in the perspective of a prolonged maintenance of some kind of monopoly in theoretical coherence.<sup>23</sup>

Dialogue must be envisioned *inseparably* both within and outside of the SI.<sup>24</sup>

Guy, July 1966

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<sup>21</sup> A reference to the SI's *Bulletin critique de publications préhistoriques*, volume VIII number 1 (1966), which was created with the intention of deceiving police and customs officials, particularly in Algeria.

<sup>22</sup> English in original.

<sup>23</sup> Begin passage not included in the excerpted texts.

<sup>24</sup> End passage not included in the excerpted texts.