

Reader's Note on *Le Scandale de Strasbourg mis à nu par ses célibataires, même*

By Max Vincent¹

What we've got here is a "beautiful work," richly illustrated: Éditions de l'Insomniaque is to be congratulated for the quality of this edition. A single flaw: the absence of an index. Having completed my reading of *Scandale de Strasbourg*, I then re-read Guy Debord's correspondence for the period July 1966 to June 1967,² the two articles that refer to the "Strasbourg scandal" in issue #11 of *Internationale situationniste*,³ and the tract "Attention! Trois provocateurs!"⁴ (included in Debord's *Oeuvres complètes*).⁵

It seems useful to distinguish between the incidents surrounding the "Strasbourg attack," on the one hand, and the publication of *La Misère en milieu étudiant*,⁶ its distribution and its

¹ Max Vincent, "NOTE DE LECTURE SUR *LE SCANDALE DE STRASBOURG MIS À NU PAR SES CÉLIBATAIRES, MÊME*." It would appear that this text, which circulates as a manuscript, has not yet been published anywhere. The phrase "note de lecture" echoes the reader's notes that Guy Debord made during his lifetime and that have been published posthumously by Éditions L'Échappée (three of five planned volumes so far). As for *Le Scandale de Strasbourg mis à nu par ses célibataires, même* [The Strasbourg Scandal Stripped Bare by Its Bachelors, Even], it was published by Éditions de l'Insomniaque in 2018; its title is a détournement of the title of a famous work of art by Marcel Duchamp. Max Vincent's text translated by NOT BORED! 20 July 2021. All footnotes by the translator.

² Debord's correspondence for the period July 1966 to June 1967 appears in *Guy Debord, Correspondance, volume 3, janvier 1965 – décembre 1968* (Éditions Fayard, 2003).

³ Cf. *Internationale situationniste* # 11 (October 1967): "Nos buts et nos méthodes dans le scandale de Strasbourg" [Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal]: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/11.scandal.htm> and "L'idéologie alsacienne" [The Alsatian Ideology]: <http://www.notbored.org/alsatian-ideology.html>.

⁴ A tract published by the SI on 22 January 1967, signed by Michèle Bernstein, Guy Debord, Mustapha Khayati, J.V. Martin, Donald Nicholson-Smith, Raoul Vaneigem and René Viénet, and translated as "Be Careful! Three Provocateurs!": <http://www.notbored.org/three-provocateurs.html>.

⁵ Guy Debord, *Oeuvres complètes* (Gallimard, 2006).

⁶ *La Misère en milieu étudiant. De la misère en milieu étudiant considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier*, written by Mustapha Khayati, attributed to members of the Situationist International and Students of Strasbourg, and published by AFGES on 22 November 1966. Translated by Ken Knabb as *On the Poverty of Student Life Considered in its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual and Especially Intellectual Aspects, with a Modest Proposal for Doing Away With It*: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/poverty.htm>.

repercussions, on the other. Concerning the beginnings and developments of the “Strasbourg attack,” this book turns out to be rich in diverse information and, today, represents the most complete documentation of this Strasbourgian “affair.” The two authors, André Bertrand and André Schneider, in some ways rehabilitate Daniel Joubert (at least in the eyes of a certain Situationist orthodoxy). And we can’t contradict them, given all the documents exhumed by this book (but also through what the two authors tell us about Joubert as a person). We have the occasion to return to the letter in the Fayard volume that was addressed to Joubert by Debord on 13 May 1964,⁷ the delectable conclusion of which (“we have quite precisely come to interrupt the sale of intellectual indulgences”) was preceded by the obligation that Joubert renounce his Christian faith and “break with all the assholes, all the suspect people” so that a dialogue between him and the situationists could become possible: in a letter to one of his friends, Joubert admitted that “the fall is magnificent” (in the midst of the commentaries of all kinds about the contents of Debord’s letter).

The second sequence of events, that of *On the Poverty of Student Life*, is better known. Here I will be more equivocal [*nuance*] than the two authors. It is true that it appears difficult to demonstrate a minimum of objectivity in a story in which you are both judge and party to the action. Especially when the story (the relationships between the four protagonists: Bertrand, Schneider, Joubert, and Debord) ends with a letter from the last one named, dated 19 February 1969,⁸ in which one of the two authors (Schneider, the recipient of the letter) is described as a “loser” and a “pathetic” individual, and the other (Bertrand) as a “stupid idiot.” Staying with this second sequence, the reader of the Fayard correspondence for that period learns nothing that he or she didn’t already know from reading *Scandale de Strasbourg* (though that correspondence isn’t without gaps, which is something to which I will return) about Debord’s attitude and personality: the reader had already been able to form an opinion on his or her own. In those eight volumes of correspondence, Debord as a person doesn’t only have “likeable” aspects (to use a euphemism). In the third part of *Lire Debord*,⁹ I go over several of Guy Debord’s character traits without, for all that, claiming to be exhaustive on the subject. He certainly had paranoid characteristics that seem difficult to avoid or deny when the reader explores the details of the correspondence. Nevertheless, other factors must be taken into account to understand Debord’s attitude in the case with which we are concerned here.

In this 1966-1967 period, [Mustapha] Khayati was Debord’s preferred intermediary. He was the one in which Debord had the most confidence (as had been the case with [Asger] Jorn, Constant [Nieuwenhuys], [Raoul] Vaneigem, then [Gianfranco] Sanguinetti, and finally [Jean-François] Martos). It is a shame that we don’t have the letters that Khayati addressed to Debord during the summer and fall of 1966. They would certainly confirm that Debord’s unpleasant, even scornful tone with regard to the members of the AFGES¹⁰ office and their friends (Bertrand and Joubert) derived from the content of the information transmitted by Khayati from Strasbourg. Such information was reinforced by the one-upmanship of the other members of the SI present in Strasbourg, who soon afterwards were immortalized by the nickname “the

⁷ Not yet translated into English.

⁸ In translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-19February1969.html>.

⁹ Dated March 2016, French only: <http://lherbentrelespaves.fr/index.php?post/2016/03/16/Lire-Debord>.

¹⁰ Association fédérative générale des étudiants de Strasbourg [General Federal Association of the Students of Strasbourg].

Garnautins.” It is inexplicable that the letter from Debord to Khayati dated 21 November 1966 (from which *Le Scandale de Strasbourg* quotes excerpts) – the most severe letter with respect to the Strasbourgeois (and the most dubious of the lot as far as its content), the very letter that the Garnautins took pleasure in distributing in Strasbourg the day after their exclusion [from the SI] – is absent from the Fayard correspondence. As is the letter of 10 April 1967 (signed by five situationists, including Debord) addressed to Bertrand, Joubert and Schneider, demanding that they break off relations with Fugler and the Recherches Libertaires group. And the letter of 4 May 1967 from Debord to Joubert (an excerpt from it is quoted in *Le Scandale de Strasbourg*, but it would have been preferable to have read the entire letter in order to not content oneself with holding forth based this extract alone). These gaps are all the more regrettable (and it is the project managers of the Fayard edition who bear the primary responsibility for them) because the incomplete character of the excerpts that have been published do not allow us to fully appreciate their context.

Reading the documents that are available today (the previously unpublished texts now in *Le Scandale de Strasbourg* are of complementary value), I do not think that I go too far when I say that Debord, whose reluctance concerning Joubert we were already aware of, but who appeared rather well disposed toward Bertrand (as indicated by the letter to Guy Bodson dated 4 July 1966),¹¹ had virtually no other information about the Strasbourg situation during the end of the summer and a large part of the fall of 1966 than that which was communicated to him by Khayati. There was also the information transmitted by the Strasbourgeois situationists, who, it seems, increased the denigration (as we can sense in the letter from Debord to Khayati, dated 29 October,¹² that quotes a remark by Garnaut). We must also take into account Debord’s statement (circa January 1967¹³ in a letter to Bertrand and Joubert) that, concerning Khayati’s negative evaluations of the “Strasbourgeois students,” those made about the Garnautins “have almost never differed from Khayati’s judgments – and then only *in their severity* (Frey and Holl).”

Let us point out the significant change of Debord’s tone in the letter that he addressed on 23 December to the “Strasbourgeois”¹⁴ (he’d just met Joubert in Paris), which radically breaks with the tone previously adopted in his letters to Khayati. Here we can speak of a caesura. The cards would be redistributed, to the detriment of the three Strasbourgeois situationists (Frey, Garnaut and Holl). There are gray areas in this sequence that are not clarified by reading *Le Scandale de Strasbourg*. On the exclusion of the Garnautins, I am tempted to believe what the SI says (in issue #11 of its journal, through “Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal” and “The Alsatian Ideology,” neither of which the authors of *Le Scandale de Strasbourg* comment upon, which I find curious) about the nature of the differences between the situationists and the three excluded people. But this is only a part of the question. This redistribution of the cards could have made Khayati’s position more difficult (since the “Strasbourgeois,” criticized in November, were knighted by the SI the following month), but it didn’t. Primarily because Khayati’s importance in the drafting of *On the Poverty of Student Life* and in the subsequent, related events couldn’t be forgotten (especially when compared with the future Garnautins’ failure to participate).

¹¹ In translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-4July1966.html>.

¹² In translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-29October1966.html>.

¹³ It says “January 2017” in the original, but this is clearly a mistake. The letter was in fact dated 22 January 1967. In translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-22January1967.html>.

¹⁴ In translation here: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-23December1966.html>.

I pass rapidly over the events of the winter [of 1966] and the spring of 1967 that set the SI in opposition to the Garnautins and their allies. But I can support the accuracy of the analysis of the two authors when they say that the leaflets, lampoons and pamphlets produced by the Garnautin faction can be considered to be “one of the first manifestations of what, in the 1970s, would commonly be identified as ‘pro-situ’ literature.”

The story ends with the already mentioned episode of February 1969: the sending of a letter, an insulting letter, that Debord addressed to Schneider to indicate the end of their relationship. Not at all surprising when you know the reason, which was the assertion that Cohn-Bendit had allegedly told Schneider that he had slapped Debord in the face at the Sorbonne (an affirmation that was denied the next day in front of a third person). You’d have to know little about Debord to think that such an attitude would go without a response. This is one example among others of something that Debord never tolerated and always elicited a violent response from him. And it wasn’t the first time that Schneider was inconsistent because, at the beginning of 1967, he’d rallied to the support of the Garnautins (supported by the members of the AFGES office) and then retracted that support a little later on. But it is no less regrettable that Debord thought it good to associate Bertrand and Joubert with the consequences of Schneider’s inconsistency.

Finally, I will say again that it seems difficult to demonstrate objectivity in a story in which one is an interested party and which, for the two authors (and Joubert, too) ends in the fashion that we have seen. The letter that André Joubert addressed to Pascal Dumontier in 1990 isn’t without interest in several aspects, but it appears uselessly polemical in others. It clarifies for the reader his meeting with Debord and Bernstein in 1964 (and also corroborates Debord’s testimony in the Fayard correspondence). It also contains useful clarifications concerning the “unfriendly relations” between the members of the AFGES office (and their friends) and the future Garnautins at the time of the drafting of *On the Poverty of Student Life*. On the other hand, Joubert’s remarks on other points can be questioned, even rejected. It is quite excessive and a bit ridiculous when he states that “thanks to us, three situationists became stars in the publishing world: Debord, Vaneigem and Khayati.” Also, in 1990, everyone already knew that Viénet had been chosen by the situationists to be listed as the official author of *Enragés et situationnistes*.¹⁵ And it is rather careless, or befits the style of newspaper writing, to add that this was a question of “launching a new author who already had a foot in publishing as a translator.” Further on, when Joubert writes that “Khayati alone wrote the entirety of the manuscript” of *On the Poverty of Student Life*, but that he (Joubert) “rewrote it from start to finish in three weeks, introducing insolent remarks that gave it its charm,” I confess my inability to be able to confirm or deny this claim: my lack of knowledge of Joubert’s writing prevents me from making any pronouncements. Whereas I can, for example, recognize Maurice Blanchot’s style in the tracts and public declarations (circa May-June 68) that, later on, we learned were in fact principally written by Blanchot. To return to *On the Poverty of Student Life*, this text (and the way it is worded) are consistent with the situationist writings that were distributed or published before the autumn of 1966. We would have to compare the two versions of it to form an opinion. Reading *Le Scandale de Strasbourg* and, before that, Debord’s correspondence, allows us to correct the point according to which Joubert, as he says in his letter to Dumontier, “remained all through the affair a suspect person that the SI was quite happy to use but without wanting to put him in the

¹⁵ *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations* (Gallimard, 1968), credited to René Viénet, but written by Guy Debord, Mustapha Khayati, Raoul Vaneigem and René Riesel.

spotlight” (he adds that he was loyal but that the situs “weren’t as steady or honest with me”). Such wasn’t the case after December 1966: these statements are refuted by the letter that Debord sent that month to the “Strasbourgeois,” the testimonies collected in *Le scandale de Strasbourg*, and the proposition of membership offered [to him] by the SI in the spring of 1967 (Bertrand was also invited). To finish this point, I note that Bertrand and Schneider, unlike Joubert, were able, while they were writing *Le scandale de Strasbourg*, to make use of documents that were unpublished in 1990 (especially the mass of information contained in Debord’s correspondence). I made clear at the outset the nature of my interest in this work; I will not go into it again. But the type of criticism that I made of Joubert’s letter to Dumontier can also be applied to the writers of *Le Scandale de Strasbourg* when it comes to other points. It would be an exaggeration to speak of their “rancor” towards Debord, but the tone of the two authors in certain pages of their book certainly gives that impression. In particular, Bertrand and Joubert insist on Debord’s scornful attitude towards the “Strasbourgeois,” which was undeniable initially, but without putting it into perspective (as I have tried to do). Here we can find the perennial critiques of Debord that have long been made: a manipulator, first of all (“he wanted to control and maneuver, in order to disorganize the camp of those who were engaged in action; to undermine ‘the ambitions’ of the most active and to promote the most unobtrusive.” And who were the latter? Then they reproach Debord for having diverted the Strasbourg scandal for his own profit (the authors are very angry about what they call “a misappropriation of intellectual property”). Focusing too much on Debord, Bertrand and Schneider writes off the two texts published by the SI in issue #11 of their journal. It would have been preferable to have a substantive discussion based on an analysis of this content. Without necessarily saying that the situationists were right on all points.

To summarize: we must place Debord and the SI in the larger perspective of the history of the avant-garde (from surrealism to the situs) that is marked by excesses, outrages, exclusions, and confrontations, which are the lot, even the logical consequences, of a “war” that all of them led against the world as it is, the heritage of which some still lay claim to. This era of noise and fury has certainly ended, but as one of them says, “pacification will never come.”¹⁶

A final note. It is disappointing, and even dreadful, to find the name of the falsifier Apostolidés¹⁷ on the list of “acknowledgements.” I don’t know the nature of the information that the two authors were able to find in the archives of this person, but it would have been preferable to find no such mention.

¹⁶ Apparently a détournement of a line by Guy Debord: “la sagesse ne viendra jamais.”

¹⁷ Jean-Marie Apostolidés, the author of two books about Guy Debord: *Les Tombeaux de Guy Debord* (1999) and *Guy Debord Le naufrageur* (2015). The latter was sharply criticized by Gianfranco Sanguinetti in “Money, Sex and Power: Concerning a Fake Biography of Guy Debord”: <http://www.notbored.org/Apostolides.pdf>.