

History and revolution in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*

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The Society of the Spectacle was written, as Guy Debord once put it, 'with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society'.¹ Following the book's publication in 1967, he and the Situationist International (SI) declared that it sought 'nothing other than to overthrow the existing relation of forces in the factories and the streets', and that it 'makes no attempt to hide its *a priori* engagement' in revolutionary social change.² Its intended audience were all 'those who are enemies of the existing order and who act efficaciously, starting from this position',³ not the academics and cultural commentators who would later come to adopt it. Debord reserved particular contempt for such 'specialists of the semblance of discussions', especially when they claimed to find value in *The Society of the Spectacle* whilst shying away from its formidable militancy. 'Of all those who have quoted from this book in order to acknowledge some importance in it', he wrote in 1979, 'I have not seen one up till now who took the risk to say, even briefly, what it was about'.⁴

The situation is not vastly different today: *The Society of the Spectacle* is often valued as a description of certain aspects of modern society, rather than as an attempt to articulate that society's transformation. This is not to deny that the book can be employed as a useful tool or reference point in such descriptions. Debord himself acknowledged this, albeit disparagingly: 'The critical concept of spectacle', he wrote, 'can undoubtedly ... be vulgarised into a commonplace hollow formula of sociologico-political rhetoric to explain and abstractly denounce everything, and thus serve as a defence of the spectacular system'.⁵ Yet the book was meant to do more than this. It was intended to function not just as an interpretation of modern society, but in a manner more akin to a work of strategy, that is, as an intellectual com-

ponent of a practical, concrete and decidedly combative project of social change.

Debord once stated that he was 'not a philosopher', but rather 'a strategist'.⁶ This stance became more prominent in his work during the 1970s, when he became increasingly preoccupied with theorising the patterns of intrigue, surveillance and manoeuvre that followed the uprisings of 1968.⁷ He was, however, fascinated by strategy and military history throughout his life, and a 'strategic' approach to the role of radical theory can be discerned in his work from at least the late 1950s onwards. He became increasingly invested in Hegelian Marxism and the theme of praxis at that time, and by the early 1960s, he had come to the view that the SI needed to produce theory capable of identifying, clarifying and facilitating such praxis in the revolutionary pursuit of a new form of social life. In many respects, these efforts culminated in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Like a work of strategy, that book attempted to set out the nature, stakes and challenges of an impending social conflict; and, like any piece of strategy, its value, for Debord, could only be ascertained practically.

This means that one of the ways in which this book might be assessed today is by treating it on its own terms and considering just how efficacious its analyses really were. I shall touch on this below. My primary aim, however, is preliminary to such an assessment: I want to demonstrate that *The Society of the Spectacle* was indeed meant to function as a contribution towards a project of social transformation, rather than as a mere work of 'sociologico-political rhetoric'. This will require reconstructing the ideas that underpin its uncompromising drive towards praxis. Doing so will lead to the view that Debord may have been rather more of a philosopher than

he wanted to admit, insofar as his 'strategic' book rests upon a set of philosophical ideas about time, history and social life.

'Historical life'

Debord's theory of 'spectacle' is centred around a broadly young-Marxian view of social life, according to which the latter is an ongoing, mutable construction. On this view, the history of human society is a process of constant social change and conflict, in which the norms and practices that articulate social activity are steadily generated, employed, contested and revised. This is a self-constitutive process, for Debord; history is not governed or steered by anything other than human action. It is not always conducted in a fully self-determining manner, however, because the structures that emerge within it can frame their inhabitants' understanding of their own collective agency in flawed, partial and socially divided ways.

For Debord, modern society had afforded the possibility of making this process a free, collective and fully self-determining affair. He and the SI held that this society's tremendous capacity to shape its environment and to mould lived experience evidenced the possibility of a new and more self-conscious form of 'historical life'⁸ (his term for forms of social existence marked by an awareness of historical mutability). Because practically every aspect of social life had become shaped and constructed by human agency, modern society was held to harbour the potential for a new mode of life in which that process of historical construction could become enriched, ludic and collectively self-determining. Yet the phenomena that evidenced this possibility also kept it in check. Society's new powers to shape life operated through a set of economically derived structures that had taken on a degree of autonomy from their producers. Modern society had thus become subordinated to a set of alienated instantiations of its own collective power to shape itself in time.

Debord maintained that this predicament was due, primarily, to the 'colonisation of everyday life' by the commodity.⁹ The latter had entailed the articulation of social life by fixed models and templates for behaviour, interaction and subjective identity. These reified norms, or 'images' of life, were held to govern life's practical conduct in ways that suited the needs of an effectively

'autonomous economy'.¹⁰ Debord's theory thus describes a social context in which such subjects act and interact in response to the options and incentives presented to them but which they do not fully *control*; a world in which they have become alienated 'performers' within a kind of collective 'show' – an alternative translation of the French *spectacle*. Spectacular society is thus a society marked by stifled potential: by the separation of social individuals from their collective capacity to shape their own lived time, and by the consequent denigration of their ability to govern their own collective future.



This is why the book is so concerned with temporality. *The Society of the Spectacle* contains two entire chapters on time, and references to time and history occur throughout its pages. It casts modern society as having become characterised by a merely 'contemplative' relation to its own historical existence. In response, *The Society of the Spectacle* – which Debord claimed to be 'communist if it is anything'¹¹ – frames the modern revolution not solely as a demand to take collective control of the means of production, as in classical conceptions of communism, but rather as an attempt to lay claim to the available means of producing and shaping lived experience in time. Indeed, 'the spectre haunting modern society' for Debord was 'history itself'.¹² The aim was

not to establish a perfect and static social formation, but rather to create a more fluid and mobile condition, in which collective social existence would 'at last be able to surrender itself joyously to the true divisions and never-ending confrontations of historical life'.¹³

Debord's theory, then, is not just an account of that which is 'contemplated' (a society shaped by the commodity, or the latter's cultural derivatives). Rather, it was meant to capture the predicament and arrested possibilities that such 'contemplation' entails, and thereby both the stakes and the aims of a revolutionary project that would respond to that predicament. His book thus addresses 'the historical moment in which we are caught'¹⁴ not just by describing some of the primary features of that moment, but rather by trying to identify, express and contribute towards resolving the very condition of being 'caught' in history.

Totality

The manner in which the theory does this relies on an attempt to think society as a totality. 'Methodologically', Debord wrote in a letter of 1964, 'the centre of revolutionary dialectical thought is the concept of the *totality*'.¹⁵ Revolutionary theory needs to understand the dynamics and tensions within a social whole, in order to engage with them and steer its transformation. A notion of totality as a mutable whole, and the 'dialectical thought' that could conceive the latter, were thus seen to be integral to any genuinely radical theory. His personal notes on strategy even state that it is 'the *same thing* to think dialectically and to think strategically', insofar as '*both denote the totality*'; both are 'aspects of the thought of praxis, which must act'.¹⁶ Thinking 'dialectically' allowed one to theorise a totality; theorising society as a totality enabled strategic engagement with the moving forces and shifting terrains of struggle within it.

The concept of spectacle enabled just such a conception of the social whole. It served to 'unify and explain a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena'¹⁷ as aspects of one general problematic. And because that problematic concerned the failures, struggles and possibilities of an entire social formation, it enabled conceiving modern society 'in its totality'¹⁸ from an explicitly revolutionary perspective, that is, from a perspective able to express the shared desires, and to focus the resultant de-

mands and frustrations, of a specific historical moment. '[O]nly the revolutionary point of view', he maintained, 'can possess the *meaning* [*sens*, or orientation] of this ensemble of phenomena'.¹⁹

In its grandest, most overtly Hegelian and hubristic sense, Debord's efforts to do this amounted to an attempt to give conscious, theoretical voice to the movement of history itself. His aim was to facilitate a condition in which the historical movement of a social whole could become a self-conscious and collectively self-determining process. The hubris is tempered by the sense in which a theory that purported to afford such a perspective could only ever do so *provisionally*. It could be 'only "the maximum of possible consciousness at this moment in society"',²⁰ because only the unfolding of history could prove it right. And this, to reiterate, is why Debord's theory had to be employed, like a work of strategy, in concrete praxis. If it was not recognised, adopted and used fruitfully by those whose conditions it meant to express, it would be a failure, and could be deemed false or at least flawed. Hence: 'the critical theory of the spectacle can only be true by uniting with the practical current of negation in society'.²¹ As Debord put it in a letter of 1971:

... if the concept of spectacle is an error, the whole damn book falls apart. However, as far as I am aware, there is no *better* [book] on the subject that concerns us; a point that takes us back to the fundamental question of consciousness in history, and of what it does in it. For example, [Marx's] *Capital* is evidently true and false: essentially, it is true, because the proletariat recognized it, although quite badly (and thus also let its errors pass).²²

I shall return to those alleged 'errors' later. But we should note that the ideas sketched here inform the SI's contention, quoted earlier, that *The Society of the Spectacle*'s analyses were marked from the very outset by an '*a priori* engagement'. The book was meant to articulate, and assist, a 'practical current of negation in society' that was already present, albeit lacking in clarity and focus.

The subject-object of history

We can take a further step towards characterising Debord's position by noting that *The Society of the Spectacle* owes a great deal to Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* – an influence evidenced by the sheer number of quotations from Hegel and Marx that Debord appears

to have taken from Lukács' pages. This is perhaps unsurprising. Sections of that book started to appear in French from the late 1950s onwards, at the time Debord was developing his mature theoretical ideas. By the early 1960s Lukács' book had acquired a degree of notoriety that no doubt appealed to Debord, and its emphasis on transformative, self-constitutive action accorded with the ambience of French existentialism, twentieth-century French Hegelianism and the legacies of Surrealism that informed Debord's developing views.

There is a striking resemblance between Lukács' own seminal account of 'contemplative' detachment and Debord's account of 'spectatorship'. In both cases, human subjects find themselves confronted by, and situated in a passive relationship towards, a seemingly immutable and independent objective world; in both cases, this condition is held to stem from the ubiquity of commodity relations; and in both cases, this predicament is to be overcome through revolutionary praxis, whereby those alienated subjects are to take conscious, collective control of their own objective existence. Moreover, although they framed this in different ways, both Debord and Lukács appear to have conceived revolutionary praxis as a condition of subject-object unity.

Debord seems close, broadly speaking, to a rather traditional reading of *History and Class Consciousness*. On such a reading, Lukács re-cast Hegel's account of 'Spirit's' ascent towards 'Absolute Knowing' as the emergence of a self-conscious and self-determining revolutionary proletariat. The latter, as subject, must come to recognise that the seemingly independent and immutable objective social world that confronts it is really the result of its own activity. In so doing, the proletariat can begin to comprehend and consciously employ its own transformative agency, shaping its world and itself freely and self-consciously as a subject-object unity. Communism is construed as the actualisation of this condition through collectively self-determining historical praxis.

The Society of the Spectacle owes a great deal to these ideas. Compare, for example, the following lines. Firstly, here is Lukács: 'the proletariat', he writes, must 'become the identical subject-object of history whose praxis will change reality'.²³ And now here is Debord: 'As for the *subject* of history, it can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and possessor of its world – that is, of history – and coming to exist as

consciousness of its own activity [*conscience de son jeu*].' 'The history shaped by this subject', Debord writes, would have 'no goal [*n'a pas d'objet*] other than the effects it works upon itself.'²⁴ In both cases, the goal of revolution is to allow human subjects to take conscious charge of their own objective existence; and in both cases, this is framed via an emphasis on history, or rather on the temporal and social dimensions of the objective existence of those human subjects.

The finer details of the distinctions between Debord's ideas and those advanced in *History and Class Consciousness* cannot be addressed here,²⁵ but we should at least note his distance from Lukács' views on political organisation. This brings us to the connection between the concept of spectacle and the SI's fierce anti-authoritarianism.

Spectacle and authority

The concept of spectacle concerns the separation of the power to shape and direct lived time from that power's producers. Such separation occurs when that power becomes fetishistically located within constructions that emerge from the conduct of social life, and which come to ensnare and restrict it within fixed patterns of activity. Debord's chief concern in this regard was with a society that had become structured and spellbound by commodity relations. Yet the commodity was viewed as only example of this very general problem: he and the SI were opposed to *any* instance in which social groups locate their collective powers and agency within reified social structures. This informs the SI's opposition to dogma, ideology and religion, but also their rejection of hierarchical structures, political leaders and revolutionary figureheads. All were treated with hostility, and so too were all forms of representational social power liable to grow detached from their base ('wherever there is independent representation the spectacle reconstitutes itself').²⁶ Hence Debord and the SI's cautious enthusiasm for anarchism,²⁷ their wariness towards Leninism, and their efforts to avoid becoming figureheads themselves ('pro-situs' were condemned as 'enthusiastic spectators of the SI');²⁸ and hence also Debord's deep distaste for Lukács' enthusiastic visions of the Party.

Despite *The Society of the Spectacle's* debts to Lukács, the book's only direct references to him are an epigraph

and a single set of damning remarks. Debord writes that Lukács' 'endless self-repudiations', conducted in response to the Russian bureaucracy, proved him to be a prime example of the 'despicable' nature of the intellectuals of his century. Lukács had shown himself to be 'an ideologue speaking in the name of the power most grossly external to the proletarian movement'; 'a power that disowns and suppresses its lackeys', and which amounted to the very 'opposite' of 'what he [Lukács] had supported in *History and Class Consciousness*'.²⁹ A genuine condition of subject-object unity, Debord held, could not involve any reliance on such an 'externality'. It could only take the form of social life governing and shaping itself *directly*.

Federated workers' councils were viewed as the best available means of achieving such a condition. Debord did not view such councils as a perfect or permanent solution to the problem of social organisation, and his enthusiasm for councilism did not stem from an uncritical view of labour.³⁰ The councils were only viewed as the best available initial means of managing a complex post-revolutionary society whilst minimising hierarchy and representative political power. Nonetheless, *The Society of the Spectacle* contains eulogistic statements such as the following:

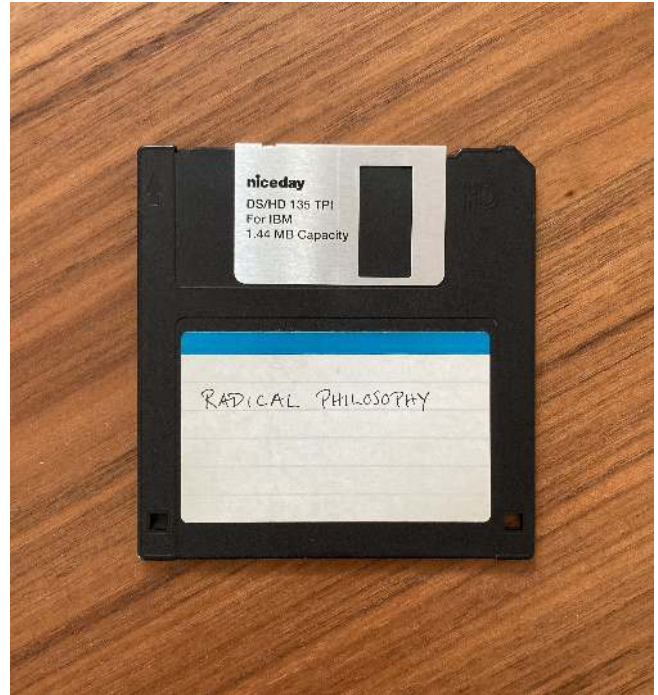
In the power of the Councils, which must internationally supplant all other power, the proletarian movement is its own product and this product is the producer himself. He is to himself his own goal. Only there is the spectacular negation of life negated in its turn.³¹

Or again: 'the power of the Councils' can 'be effective only if it transforms existing conditions in their entirety', and it 'cannot assign itself a smaller task if it wants to be recognized and to recognise itself in its world'.³² Through such forms of organisation, a mode of social life could be established that would be 'inseparable from a coherent intervention in history'.³³

Hegel and Marx

I have proposed that *The Society of the Spectacle* should be understood as a work of 'dialectical, strategic thought';³⁴ that it was written with the intention that its ideas should be actualised in praxis; and that the political project that it sought to articulate was that of rendering 'historical life' a self-conscious and self-determinate affair

through the practical instantiation of a condition of subject-object unity. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that Debord once remarked that 'one cannot fully comprehend [*The Society of the Spectacle*] without Marx, and especially Hegel'.³⁵



Hegel is 'especially' significant because Debord understood him as having made a huge contribution towards articulating 'the thought of history', that is, towards clarifying and setting out a mode of thought capable of grasping the conflictual dynamics of historical change. Yet Debord's Hegel fell short of casting that mode of thought as a means of actually *making* history. For Debord, Hegel presented human history as directed by a 'supreme external agent',³⁶ and as having reached a conclusion in the society of his own day; and despite setting out an inherently mobile mode of thought, well suited to thinking the world's transformation, he had locked it within a purportedly final and static metaphysical system. (Debord's reading of Hegel is, of course, highly questionable.) Marx's extraction of a 'rational kernel' from the 'mystical shell'³⁷ of Hegel's work was thus viewed as the removal of that dynamic mode of thought from the fixity and conservatism of the Hegelian system; a removal that allowed the 'realisation' of philosophy in concrete praxis, and thus that of dialectical thought as practical *strategic* thought. The famed Marxian 'inversion' of Hegel was thereby understood as a reversal of perspective, insofar as Hegel's retrospective vision of a

completed past was replaced with an attempt to make the future. That attempt, for Debord, constituted the real core and lasting significance of Marx's entire *oeuvre*. 'Marx's project', for Debord, was 'the project of a conscious history'.³⁸

Many of these ideas are encapsulated in the following claims, which are taken from a letter of 1969, and which draw heavily on Marx's final thesis on Feuerbach. 'The philosophers', before Marx, Debord writes, 'had interpreted the world as a given block'. Hegel, however, made a significant advance: he 'interpreted concrete change, the world constituting itself in its own history'. Yet Hegel remained at the level of 'philosophy', and thus of 'interpretation', because he 'reduced' that process of transformation to the 'project of the Spirit', and so 'remained a philosopher' confronted by 'an external history'. Or, in other words: Hegel, for Debord, fell short of the very subject-object unity that his own work had espoused, because he had failed to grasp that the real locus of that unity could not lie in a metaphysical construct, but only in the self-constitution of collective social life. Marx had contributed towards remedying this by indicating that the 'critique of Hegelianism' should lead directly towards recognising the need 'to take an active part in history'.³⁹

It may be useful to place the foregoing in relation to the current interest in reading Debord's theory as echoing aspects of contemporary Marxist value theory.⁴⁰ These readings often focus on the German *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and *Wertkritik* schools, which developed roughly around the same time as Debord's theory. There is no direct line of influence between the SI and this material, but there are certainly echoes and resemblances.⁴¹ This has fostered a growing interest in treating *The Society of the Spectacle* as a description of a world shaped by the commodity relations theorised in *Capital*, and that in turn has encouraged attempts to understand Debord's Hegelian Marxism in ways that centre around Marx's use of Hegel's *Logic* in *Capital*.⁴² This kind of approach can be very fruitful indeed, not least because it can point towards ways of developing Debord's ideas beyond his own rather schematic formulations on the topic. Yet although this offers an excellent means of identifying what is important in Debord's work today, it seems to differ somewhat from what Debord himself felt to be of primary importance.⁴³

Capital's account of the fetishistic subordination of

human subjects to their own objective creations is certainly crucial to *The Society of the Spectacle*, and it merits serious study; but as Debord himself pointed out, practically all of his book's references to Marx are taken from earlier texts, produced between 1843 and 1846.⁴⁴ His use of Hegel is similar. As his archived reading notes show, he did indeed engage with Hegel's mature *Logic*, but in a rather cursory fashion, and he appears to have been far more concerned with the romantic themes of dynamism, movement and collective 'life' set out in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and earlier writings.⁴⁵ When viewed from what I take to be Debord's perspective, prioritising *The Society of the Spectacle's* account of capitalist value would run the risk of prioritising its claims *about* modern society, potentially at the cost of his own emphasis on strategic intervention.

This brings us to the primary errors that Debord ascribed to Marx's work, and to elements of Marxism: namely, that of privileging economic analysis over the theorisation of revolutionary action. In chapter four of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord argues that the failure of the 1848 revolutions sent Marx in search of a 'scientific' and lawlike account of the capitalist present and its immanent end. This laid a basis for a focus on the determination of historical events by the economy; a focus that 'obscured his [Marx's] historical thought',⁴⁶ and which marred his 'theoretical legacy to the workers' movement'.⁴⁷ Subsequent Marxist theorists could then 'patiently study economic development' and thus adopt a 'contemplative' approach to a history purportedly made and ruled by the economy. The 'advent of the subject of history was consequently set back even further', whilst 'revolutionary practice ... tended to be thrust out of theory's field of vision altogether'.⁴⁸ This effectively replicated the very problem that needed to be resolved: the governance of social and historical life by its own constructions.⁴⁹

So, for Debord, and despite their great contributions, both Hegel and Marx could be criticised for retaining a 'contemplative' approach to history, insofar as aspects of their work reflected and naturalised history's determination by forces other than human agency (Spirit on the one hand, the economy on the other). Nonetheless, he also held that their work contained vital resources for thinking the movement and conduct of social life.

This can be illustrated by Debord's personal reading

notes on Hyppolite's *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, which include the following quotation:

In the [early] *Logic* of Jena, Hegel thinks of infinity as a dialectical relation of the one and the many, but we can recognise in this logical dialectic the very idea of life. Reciprocally, life is this dialectic itself, and life forces the Spirit to think dialectically.⁵⁰

Significantly, Debord wrote in the margin of this note '*a contrario la non vie*'.⁵¹ A 'living', dynamic 'dialectical relation of the one and the many' contrasts with the condition of generalised 'non-life' described in *The Society of the Spectacle*: a condition of fragmentation, isolation and submission to reified norms, engendered by the articulation of social life through commodity relations. Two points can be made here. First, the quotation accords with Debord's indications that 'historical life' is somehow dialectical in nature. '[H]istory is dialectic', he wrote, and a 'dialectician ... possesses the intelligence of the real'.⁵² Second, it is not just the experience of the conduct of social life itself that 'forces the Spirit [i.e. collective social life] to think dialectically', and to thereby come to know its own movement; *a contrario*, this is prompted within modern society by the existential *deficiencies* engendered by the 'autonomous movement of the non-living'.⁵³

These ideas, I would suggest, inform Debord's claim that the experience of modern life obliges 'workers' to 'become dialecticians'.⁵⁴ If they were to respond to its existential poverty and govern their own collective lives in the absence of spectacular representation, they would need take up 'dialectical, strategic thought' in order to comprehend and direct the history that their own social agency creates. Modern life, it seems, was held to have both enabled and prompted such a perspective, due to the degree to which it had not only foregrounded society's vast capacities to shape lived experience, and to mould historical events, but because it had also separated its populace from the ability to consciously and collectively employ those capacities. Hence his *détournement* of *The Communist Manifesto*: because 'human beings have ... been thrust into history', they 'find themselves obliged to view their relationships in a clear-eyed manner',⁵⁵ and to thereby adopt the same 'dialectical' and 'strategic' perspective on historical life that Debord's book sought to articulate. This then brings us to the book's ambitious account of its own conditions of possibility.

Time and spectacle

The Society of the Spectacle rests on a philosophical anthropology that was influenced by Hegel, Marx and existentialism.⁵⁶ It treats human beings as historical, social and self-authoring creatures. We are held to shape ourselves and our world through the social actions and experiences that we conduct and undergo in time. But the book also holds that this capability for historical self-determination has been instantiated and understood in more or less adequate ways in differing socio-historical circumstances. The 'temporalisation of man [sic]', Debord claimed, is 'effected through the mediation of a society'.⁵⁷ Our experience of our own existence and agency in time, in other words, is shaped by the social structures that we inhabit.

This appears to rest on the following premises. First: social power – that is, the power available to the inhabitants of a given social structure – is predicated upon the activity and organisation of a society. Second: such power is, therefore, in some sense *collective*. And third: this power is, ultimately, the power to shape history. After all, the power available to a society, or to individuals within it, is the power to govern what happens in time, and to shape how events, actions and possibilities are understood. This is why Debord writes that 'To reflect on history is, inseparably, *to reflect on power [pouvoir]*'.⁵⁸ His point seems to be that history – in the sense of human awareness of actions and events in time – is always made and told in ways that are articulated by the operation of social power.

The very possibility of this book – a book that attempts to articulate the revolutionary demands of its moment by framing 'historical time' as both 'the milieu and goal of the proletarian revolution'⁵⁹ – seems to be premised on the view that modern society's revolutionary dilemma had clearly revealed this ontological condition, showing it in a light that was unavailable in the past. This is presented via an extraordinarily bold philosophy of history that casts the radical demands of Debord's present as revealing the buried core of all previous social struggles.

Much of this is set out in the book's fifth chapter, which describes the differing conceptions of time enabled by a series of different socio-economic formations,

and which casts them as developmental steps towards a full awareness of humanity's self-constitutive and historical nature afforded by Debord's present. The chapter's narrative begins with the 'cyclical' time of the very earliest human societies, in which the experience of temporal change is governed by the seasons, and in which, due to the absence of writing, memory lasts no longer than the memory of the present generation. Into this simple perpetual present, the division of labour, fostered by agriculture and surplus, introduces new possibilities for social change and a more complex sense of temporality. Significantly, Debord introduces class at this point: a distinction is drawn between those who enable the life of a community and those who direct this life.⁶⁰ The central idea here appears to be that the division of labour affords historical change in a manner that had previously been unavailable, but that it also entails the separation of an increasingly mutable history from those whose social activity enables its existence. This separation is then traced throughout the rest of the chapter's narrative, which takes in Ancient China, Greece, medieval and renaissance societies, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the temporality of capitalist society.

Capitalism is described as dispersing a new sense of historically differentiated time throughout society. Industry, technology and commerce inaugurate an increased sense of humanity's capacity to shape its world. That capacity still remains removed from its producers, however, because the 'qualitative use of life' becomes increasingly shaped by the quantitative abstractions of labour time.⁶¹ Historical time thus becomes more obvious and universal, but only via the subordination of lived interactions to the demands of an autonomous economy. So, whilst historical change becomes more prominent, it also becomes more removed from conscious control. As Debord puts it: 'the bourgeoisie unveiled irreversible historical time and imposed it on society only to deprive society of its *use*'.⁶² This, I would suggest, is why the book's celebrated fourth chapter, which discusses the history of the workers' movement, begins in the immediate *aftermath* of the bourgeois revolutions.⁶³ The modern revolutionary project, for Debord, is essentially aimed at grasping the new historical time afforded by the social, cultural and technological capacities of capitalist society.

As noted earlier, Debord indicates that the articu-

lation of social life through commodity relations in his own present had demonstrated, explicitly, that modern society possessed a tremendous capacity to shape and structure lived social experience; but, by the same token, it also meant the extreme separation of that power from the direct control of its producers. He thus writes that 'though separated from his product, man [*sic*] is more and more, and ever more powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world', and yet 'the closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically he is cut off from that life'.⁶⁴ Modern capitalist culture had thus foregrounded the problem that lay, *in nuce*, within the very first division of labour: namely, the separation of historical change from its producers.

This then means that the predicament posed by modern society was held to have revealed a problem that could now be identified, retrospectively, throughout the past. There is textual evidence to support this. Debord consistently located the emergence of spectacular society in the early decades of the twentieth century, but he seems to have understood this as a clearer, fuller, expression of something much older. He states in *The Society of the Spectacle* that 'all separate power has been spectacular';⁶⁵ that 'at the root of the spectacle lies the oldest of all social specialisations, the specialisation of power';⁶⁶ and that 'power draped itself in the outward garb of a mythical order from the very beginning'.⁶⁷ A letter of 1971 even states that the spectacle has its roots in antiquity, and that it appeared in its '*completed form*' (my emphasis) around '1914–20'.⁶⁸

The 'new' proletariat

This purported clarification of the stakes of revolutionary struggle enabled by Debord's context also entailed a new characterisation of the revolutionary class. In *Capital*, Marx indicates that capitalist social relations render the inhabitants of society subordinate to the dictates of their own economic system. Although he clearly held that 'the capitalist is just as enslaved by the relationships of capitalism as is his opposite pole, the worker', insofar as both are required to play the roles assigned to them by this economic system, Marx stressed that these roles involve private ownership of the means of production, and that the worker and the capitalist thus experienced this enslavement 'in a quite different manner'.⁶⁹ For Marx,

the proletariat are all those who have been separated from the possibility of producing their own means of subsistence independently, and who must perform wage-labour to maintain their existence. This then means that the general problem of fetishism – the subordination of society as a whole to the demands of its economy – is addressed in a manner that centres around the miseries of the proletariat and their impetus towards overcoming capitalist social relations.

Debord and the SI, however, were located within a version of capitalism that had seemingly remedied the nineteenth-century poverty that exercised Marx. More accurately, it had transported that poverty overseas. This relative affluence prompted questions concerning the motivation for revolt. The SI's answer was to contend that, within the advanced capitalist societies, a new, more existential form of poverty had come to the fore; one that foregrounded the sense in which the general problem of fetishism pertains to all. The 'new' proletariat, they claimed, were not just all those who had been separated from the means of *maintaining* their lives, but rather all those who had been separated from the means of *directing* their lives. This new, effectively class-less proletariat was vast – Debord writes of 'the proletarianisation of the world'⁷⁰ – because it was held to be composed of all those who, 'regardless of variation in their degree of affluence', have 'no possibility of altering the social space-time that society allots to them'.⁷¹ The nature of the new proletariat therefore corresponded to the changed stakes of the new revolution: access to history, not just to material goods.

This new poverty had foregrounded and clarified the basically temporal nature of the stakes of *all* social struggle. It seems that, in Debord's view, *every* demand for greater liberty, the amelioration of poverty and free time had essentially been a demand for increased self-determination, however those demands may have been construed in the past; and in consequence, *all* prior revolutionary efforts contained, implicit within them, a 'simple, unforgettable core' that had finally been revealed by the commodified malaise of Debord's own moment. This 'unforgettable core' was now expressed in the new proletariat's demand 'to *live* the historical time that it creates'.⁷² The true face of the temporal class division that emerges, in Debord's historical narrative, from the very first social division of labour was now in full view;

hence his claim that the predicament posed by spectacular society 'leads the revolutionary project to become *visibly* what it always was *essentially*'.⁷³

This carries a significant corollary. If the problem thus revealed is not reducible to capitalist social relations, then the destruction of capitalism would not guarantee its final resolution. Spectacle – or some other version of the problem of separated social power – could reoccur in the future. This would happen if the revolutionary project pursued or established anything other than fluid, revisable and non-hierarchical forms of social organisation, and indeed if it employed such forms of organisation within revolutionary struggle. Debord's historical moment, and the failures of the past, had revealed a central insight: revolutionaries, as he put it, 'can no longer combat alienation with alienated forms of struggle'.⁷⁴

Theory in the war of time

The Society of the Spectacle's analysis of its own present is predicated on an ontology that is in turn supported by a philosophy of history. It sets out a view of history that had been made possible by a particular moment *in* history; a moment, moreover, in which the need to *make* history had become a particularly pressing concern. Yet as we saw earlier, the validity of its claims, and thus that of its visions of its past and present, could only be ascertained through its application in praxis. To put that more bluntly: the entire intellectual edifice outlined here was constructed as a means of framing the predicament posed by Debord's present, and its validity depends entirely on its success in that regard.

The Society of the Spectacle was intended to give the-oretical voice to the revolutionary struggle of its own day. It was not intended to do so from a position *outside* and 'external' to that political movement. If it remained in such a position, it could hope to be no more than a description of that movement, or a set of didactic instructions directed towards it, rather than that movement's own immanent theoretical expression. Rather like the role of the party for Lukács, the role of theory for Debord is to mediate the relation between those whose social activity enables historical life, and the self-determinate conduct of that life. But it can assume no prior authority: its merits can only be established practically, through the extent to which it is recognised and employed fruitfully

by those whose situation it endeavours to explain. If this does not take place, the theory must be as flawed as any faulty battle plan; and if it stands at one remove from concrete action, lays claim to some sort of timeless validity, or imposes dictates and putatively 'correct' ideas, it can only be a 'contemplative' and false representation of the revolutionary movement of its time.

These ideas entail that *The Society of the Spectacle's* analyses must be specific to its own historical moment. This is usually overlooked. The temptation to use the book as a critical sociological description of modern society fosters an understandable desire to claim that the book's relevance has only increased since its publication in 1967. But such claims sit rather uncomfortably alongside statements such as this:

The petty people of the present age seem to believe that I have approached things by way of theory, that I am a builder of theory – a sort of sagely architecture which they imagine they need only move in to as soon as they know its address, and which, ten years later, they might even modify a little by shuffling a few sheets of paper, so as to achieve the definitive perfection of the theory that will effectuate their salvation. But theories are only made to die in the war of time. Like military units, they must be sent into battle at the right moment; and whatever their merits or insufficiencies, we can only use those that are available in the time that they are needed. They have to be replaced because they are continually being worn out – by their decisive victories even more than by their partial defeats.⁷⁵

No instance of radical theory, for Debord, can ever hope to remain true beyond the moment in which it is meant to intervene. Celebrating and preserving a theory, and imposing it upon subsequent moments, would only render it a reified image of the agency that it purported to articulate.

Moreover, *The Society of the Spectacle* could now be judged to be 'false', given that it heralded a revolution that never came. Debord denied this, and in the years that followed the book's publication, he declared that history had only continued to prove him right. In 1979, he wrote of 'the confirmation all my [book's] theses encounter',⁷⁶ and in 1992, he stated that 'the continued unfolding of our epoch has merely confirmed and further illustrated the theory of the spectacle'.⁷⁷ But this position was maintained by focussing on the extent to which he had correctly predicted trends in the development of

capitalist society, rather than revolutionary praxis, and as the revolutionary potential of May 1968 retreated into the past, a growing sense of lost possibility entered Debord's work. This informs his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* of 1988: a book that argued that the contradictions identified in 1967 had deepened, but in ways that rendered social change more difficult.

One of the ways in which we might now approach this material is to address it in this vein. Once the 'strategic' notion of praxis that subtends the book is reconstructed, it could be read critically on its own terms: a political and historical study could then relate the theory's development and articulation to the social contexts in which it sought to intervene, and questions could be asked about its adoption and use by those whose struggles it sought to facilitate.⁷⁸ But I do not think that this is the only option. Once that reconstruction has been conducted, it also becomes possible to treat the model thus produced as an object of critical enquiry in its own right, that is, to view these ideas about temporality, social life and normativity independently from Debord's own ambitions. This would entail drawing out and addressing the 'philosophical' foundations that the purportedly 'strategic' dimensions of his theory rest upon.

Those ideas merit criticism regardless of their efficacy in praxis. The historical narrative described above is concerned with social power and domination, but it has almost nothing to say about the history of slavery, and it is completely silent about race and gender. It is also profoundly Eurocentric; an issue sharpened by Debord's insistence on the significance of 'Hegel, Marx [and] Feuerbach' and the dilemmas raised in 'modern Western poetry and art' for a global revolution.⁷⁹ In addition, Debord's conception of revolution *qua* subject-object unity can, at times, resemble a secularised but nonetheless furious holy war: an utterly uncompromising campaign dedicated to eradicating *all* forms of separated power, wherever they might arise.⁸⁰ Perhaps the theory's opposition to flawed normative structures and its openness to critical revision provides grounds for addressing such omissions and concerns. And perhaps, moreover, it contains resources that could be drawn out of Debord's work and developed independently. At the very least, the difficult ontological questions posed by his conception of praxis deserve further consideration and discussion, and that inevitably means drawing the 'philosopher' out of

the ‘strategist’ to some degree. Regardless of whether or not such avenues are or indeed should be pursued, the intent of the reading set out here has been to go at least some way towards placing Debord’s commitment to revolution at the centre of his theory, and thereby towards justifying his cherished ‘bad reputation’.⁸¹

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Notes

1. Guy Debord, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*’, trans. Michel Prigent and Lucy Forsyth (Chronos Publications: London, 1979), available at https://libcom.org/library/preface-fourth-italian-edition-society-spectacle-guy-debord#_ednref6, 1979; *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 1794. This is a revised and expanded version of my ‘Histoire et révolution dans *La Société du spectacle* de Guy Debord’ in *Revue Française d’histoire des idées politiques* 55 (2022), 91–118. I am grateful to Bertrand Cochard, Robb Dunphy, John McHale, Anthony Hayes, Stewart Martin, Eric-John Russell and Ross Sparkes for helpful comments on earlier versions of this text.
2. Situationist International, *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. and ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 340–1; Situationist International, *Internationale situationniste* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997), 615.
3. Debord, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition’.
4. Debord, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition’.
5. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 143, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 852.
6. This is an anecdote relayed by Giorgio Agamben in his ‘Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s Films’, trans. Brian Holmes, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (London: October Books/MIT Press, 2004), 313.
7. As he put it in a letter of 1974: ‘The principal work that it appears to me should be envisaged now – as the complementary contrary to *The Society of the Spectacle*, which described frozen alienation (and the negation that was implicit within it) – is the theory of historical action. This means to bring forth, in its moment, which has come, strategic theory’. Guy Debord, *Correspondance Volume 5: Janvier 1973 – Décembre 1978* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2005), 127.
8. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 57 translation

altered; *Oeuvres*, 799.

9. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 29.
10. Debord *The Society of the Spectacle*, 34.
11. Guy Debord, *Correspondance Volume 4: Janvier 1969 – Décembre 1972* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2004), 457.
12. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 141.
13. Debord, ‘Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition’.
14. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 15, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 768.
15. Guy Debord, *Correspondance Volume 2: Janvier 1960 – Décembre 1964* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2001), 304.
16. Guy Debord, *Stratégie*, ed. Laurence Le Bras (Paris: Éditions l’échappée, 2018), 430, emphasis in the original.
17. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 14, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 768.
18. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 13.
19. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 455, emphasis in the original.
20. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 456.
21. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 143.
22. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 457. I am grateful to John McHale and Denis Chevrier-Bousseau for help with this translation.
23. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1971), 197.
24. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 48, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 792.
25. *History and Class Consciousness* was published at the same time as Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy* (another work to which Debord was indebted, and indeed one that greatly informed his critique of ‘economism’ outlined below). Both books were criticised by the Party, but where Korsch refused to capitulate, Lukács eventually distanced himself from his book. In 1967 he wrote a new and critical preface to it, where he criticised the book’s vision of subject-object unity, contending that he had presented alienation in a manner that could not account for the necessary objectification of subjective agency in action: all such objectification, he claimed, had been blurred with alienation, and thus the call for subject-object unity was really a call for a condition of tranquil perfection that amounted to an attempt to ‘out-Hegel Hegel’ (Lukács, *History*, xxiii). We can assume that Debord did not read this preface before its publication (it was not translated into French until 1974; *The Society of the Spectacle* was published in 1967, but Debord started writing it in 1965). He may, however, have read a short statement that Lukács published in *Arguments* following the French translation of *History and Class Consciousness* in 1960. The statement

warned readers away from *History and Class Consciousness*, and I suspect that it would only have reinforced Debord's view that Lukács had simply capitulated to his critics. The question still stands, however, as to whether Lukács' criticisms pertain to *The Society of the Spectacle*'s own vision of subject-object unity. I would suggest the following response. Lukács states in his 1967 preface that he came to realise his errors after reading Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in 1930. Debord drew heavily on the *Manuscripts* when writing *The Society of the Spectacle*, and the ontology that underlies its claims is greatly informed by Marx's early work. Admittedly, the textual evidence is limited, but I would propose that his ostensible understanding of human existence in time goes some way towards avoiding the problem of confusing objectification with alienation, and of thereby mistakenly implying the need for objectification's erasure. Referencing Hegel, Debord writes that 'time ... is a necessary alienation, the milieu in which the subject realises himself whilst losing himself, becomes other in order to become truly himself. The opposite obtains in the case of the alienation that now holds sway'. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 115-6, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 835, emphasis in the original. Jappe makes the same point in Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 26.

26. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 17, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 770.

27. Debord criticises anarchism in theses 91-4 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, chiefly for lacking a theory of history, but praises the Spanish anarchists of the 1930s as 'the most advanced model of proletarian power ever realised'. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 64.

28. Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International*, trans. John McHale (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 32.

29. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 81.

30. In a letter of 1972, in which he discussed the councils, he stressed the 'necessity of abolishing work', and stated that their organisation should 'not be a question of the self-management of the existing productive process'. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 617.

31. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 87, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 818.

32. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 127.

33. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 87.

34. Guy Debord, *Correspondance Volume 7: Janvier 1988 - Novembre 1994* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard), 78.

35. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 454.

36. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 51.

37. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 103.

38. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 52.

39. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 94-5

40. This approach can be traced back to Anselm Jappe's seminal *Guy Debord* (first published in Italian in 1992). This was the first substantial work to address Debord's Hegelian Marxism seriously, and it is significant in this regard that Debord described it as 'the best-informed book about me' (Debord, *Correspondance* 7, 453). Its claims concerning the contemporary relevance of Debord's theory have also proved influential: its contemporary salience, he held, lies in its account of commodified social relations, rather than in the notions of alienated agency and praxis that subtend it, and its emphasis on class struggle remains too close to an outdated classical Marxism. For Jappe, the relevance of Debord's theory thus lay in its proximity to new readings of 'the Marxian theory of value'. Jappe, *Debord*, 18.

41. As in Debord, the idea of fetishism is typically foregrounded by these readings of Marx, and emphasis is placed on the ways in which value functions as a mode of abstract, impersonal domination. In *Wertkritik*, with which Jappe is associated, one also finds a scepticism towards traditional Marxism's prioritisation of class that accords with the SI's vexed moves away from traditional class analysis (discussed below).

42. Eric-John Russell's impressive *Spectacular Logic in Hegel and Debord: Why Everything is as it Seems* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021) affords the most extensive discussion of the relation between Debord and Marx's mature value-theory that I am aware of. It identifies homologies between Debord's discussion of spectacle, Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's mature account of commodities and capitalist value.

43. I am indebted to Eric-John Russell for this formulation.

44. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 140.

45. Debord's archived notes, which consist almost entirely of quotations that he copied and kept for reference, are now being published. His notes on the Hegel's *Logic* are extremely sparse. All but one are taken from that book's prefaces; there is almost nothing from the text itself, save for a set of lines quoted from the *Doctrine of Essence*. The publishers of the notes have pointed out that these lines don't match the French translation of the *Logic* that Debord seems to have used, or indeed other available French translations (Debord, *Marx Hegel*, 508). It thus seems that he found the lines elsewhere; and if that is so, the evidence that Debord conducted a serious reading of the *Logic* looks thin. It is significant, moreover, that these lines present contradiction as the 'source of all movement and life'. See Debord, *Marx Hegel*, 387; the quoted lines can be found in G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 2015), 381–2. Once again, one gets the impression that Hegel is significant for Debord because his philosophy provided a means of thinking change, movement and conflict in the conduct of historical life. These same lines were used in a letter of 1970 (Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 317). If they were used at that time because Debord had recently encountered them, then that encounter would have happened *after* he wrote *The Society of the Spectacle*.

46. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 56, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 798.

47. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 54.

48. Debord, *The Society of the Society*, 54–5.

49. Debord's views here are very close to, and seem informed by, Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*.

50. Debord, *Marx Hegel*, 148. Hyppolite also used these lines in his *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of History*, trans. Bond Harris and Jacqueline Spurlock (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida), 43, and Debord copied them from that text too, clearly finding them important (*Marx Hegel*, 418). The translation used here has been taken from Hyppolite's *Introduction*, as it is slightly clearer.

51. Debord, *Marx Hegel*, 148n.

52. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 60, 609.

53. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 12, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 766.

54. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 89.

55. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 48. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 1985), 83.

56. This combination of influences is evidenced in *The Society of the Spectacle*'s claim, made via a quotation from Hegel, that 'Man – that "negative being who is to the extent that he abolishes being" – is one with time'. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 92.

57. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 92.

58. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 98.

59. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 79.

60. See thesis 128 of Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 93–4, and *passim*.

61. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 105.

62. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 105.

63. *The Society of the Spectacle*'s chapter on the history of the workers' movement opens with a critique of Hegel. This accords with Debord's claim that the bourgeois order inaugurated a world shaped by a sense of history, but

which seemed to move of its own accord. As indicated above, Debord viewed Hegel's philosophy as echoing this problem, and the 'economistic' aspects of Marxism as echoing it further.

64. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 24.

65. Debord *The Society of the Spectacle*, 20.

66. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 18.

67. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 20.

68. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 455–6.

69. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 990.

70. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 21.

71. SI, *Situationist International Anthology*, 141.

72. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 106.

73. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 89–90.

74. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 89; *Oeuvres*, 819. These issues shaped the SI's fraught efforts to balance both 'real accord on a central basis and individual autonomy'. Debord, *Correspondance* 4, 53; see also thesis 121 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, 88. They sought to achieve that balance through dialogue and debate between equals, but the result was a tendency to expel individuals whose positions did not meet with the emergent consensus.

75. Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works*, 150–1, translation altered; *Oeuvres*, 1353–4.

76. Debord, 'Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition'.

77. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 7.

78. For the SI's own views on the ways in which their ideas related to the political issues and events of their day, see for example their essays: 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy', which addresses the Watts riots of 1965; 'Address to Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries'; their 1966 contribution to student politics, 'On the Poverty of Student Life'; 'Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal'; their 1969 reflection on the events of the preceding May, 'The Beginning of an Era'. Debord's correspondence is also full of variously supportive and condemnatory letters to groups and agents around the world.

79. SI, *Situationist International Anthology*, 190.

80. I am indebted here to Daniel Lopez' interpretation of Lukács in his *Lukács, Praxis and the Absolute* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), and to some of the ex-Situationist T.J. Clark's reflections on the SI.

81. Guy Debord, *Cette mauvaise réputation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).