

THE POLITICS OF WHIM

A CRITIQUE OF THE 'SITUATIONIST' VERSION OF MARXISM



CHRIS R. TAME

While at University I once put up a notice in the student union building asking anyone interested in individualist and libertarian thought to contact me. The only people to do so were a small group who described themselves as “anarchists” and “situationists”. At the time my impression of “situationism” was simply that of another odd *avant garde* artistic group akin to the surrealists, and since my fortunately brief acquaintance with these particular individuals confirmed them to be more of those coercive socialists who have the staggering audacity to call themselves anarchists, I was disinclined to concern myself further with either them or “Situationism”.

Reading *Leaving the Twentieth Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International*,¹ a collection of situationist essays, amply confirmed my earlier good judgement. Indeed, there are a few books the enforced reading of which I would consider a suitable punishment for my worst enemies, and this work would certainly deserve a premier place among them. It constitutes a surely certifiable case of the “Higher Nonsense” that seems to emanate so frequently from Continental politico-aesthetic cults (e.g., Dada, Surrealism, Structuralism, etc.). In fact, a psychological study really should be done on the type of mentality which can produce the sort of horrendous verbiage we find in this work, on the aberrations

which result in a prose which combines stifling turgidity with a degree of abstraction and conceptual reification that frequently takes one from the realm of pretentious absurdity to that of starkly incomprehensible insanity.

Unfortunately, however, the Situationists do have further significance. In the past they were an influence upon the now defunct English group, the “Angry Brigade” (perpetrators of a number of bombings), and they continue to exert a malign and quite widespread influence upon the fringes of “radical” and “anarchist” youth throughout the world. But their greatest significance probably lies in the interesting evidence they constitute regarding the motivation of Marxist and socialist ideology.

I SITUATIONISM: AN OUTLINE

So what do the Situationalists believe?

They are apparently in complete agreement with basic Marxian economics, its analysis and critique of commodity production and wage labour. But their main aim at the moving target of capitalism centres not on its material shortcomings - its unprecedented and unrivalled provision of material goods has made this tactic somewhat untenable these days - but on its alleged psychological and cultural ones. In this they built upon the critique of “alienation” so

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

important in the work of the young Marx, a critique extracted since World War II from the now less attractive and plausible superstructure of "scientific socialism" to enjoy fresh popularity in the analysis, and on the banners, of various "new" radicalisms.

The bulk of the Situationists' writings is, then, a critique of "our alienated social life" (p. 13), the "poverty of everyday life", the "penury amidst abundant consumer goods" (p. 50). Their analysis is, however, identical in essentials to that of Marx, Marcuse, Fromm, the whole Frankfurt School, Ernest Becker and the now myriad swarm of 'alienationists'. It differs only in certain matters of emphasis (e.g., their critique of art and the city), in certain suggested social "therapies" (the famous "construction of situations"), and some of the terminology. The term "Spectacle", perhaps their most famous terminological innovation, is simply a synonym for "alienation". As the editor Christopher Gray states in his commentary, "Spectacle" means:

"... a circus, a show, an exhibition - a one-way transmission of experience; a form of 'communication' to which one side, the audience, can never reply; a culture based on the reduction of almost everyone to a state of abject non-creativity: of receptivity, passivity and isolation. Now they (i.e., the Situationists) saw that the same structure applied not only to cultural and leisure 'activity', not only to political organisation (whether that of the ruling classes or that of the so-called 'Left') but this experience of passivity, isolation and abstraction was the universal experience imposed by contemporary capitalism ... an experience radiating from its basic alienation, the commodity. Henceforward, consumer capitalism was to be simply *the society of the spectacle*." (p.7, emphasis in original)

Throughout this book, then, we are confronted with a ceaseless and tedious polemic against "this mechanical civilisation" and "inevitably catatonic leisure" (p. 18).² Contemporary civilisation is characterised by its alleged "exhaustion ... squalor ... stagnation" (p. 54). Everywhere "the same boring spectacle of the same boring alienation spread(s) over the whole face of the earth." (p. 44) And thus we are informed that:

"Life in its entirety is suspended in a negativity which erodes it and defines it formally. To talk of life today is like talking of rope in the house of a hanged man. Since the key of will-to-live has been lost, we have wandered through the corridors of an endless mausoleum ..." (p. 54)

It is this sort of analysis (to honour it with a title it does not deserve) which constitutes the foundations of Situationism's allegedly new revolutionary theory. As they themselves declare:

"Revolutionary theory can only be based on a critique of everyday life in capitalist society; it must broadcast a different conception of happiness. The left and right are in agreement as to the nature of poverty: shortage of food. They are also in agreement as to the nature of happiness. This is the root of the mystification that has wrecked the workers movement in the highly industrialised countries. Revolutionary propaganda must offer everybody the possibility of a radical change in their way of life, a change that they will experience right away. In Europe this task entails a far more specific conception of what true wealth would be - only in this way can the poverty of cars and television sets become truly intolerable to the exploited." (p. 128)

What are we to make of all this, of such complaints as the following?

".... (M)ajor breakthroughs in the conquest of nature ... have failed to make the slightest difference to the nature of everyday life." (p. 8)

"A new form of mental illness has swept the planet: banalization. Everyone is hypnotized by work and by comfort; by the garbage disposal unit, by the lift, by the bathroom, by the washing machine. This state of affairs, born of a rebellion against the harshness of nature, has far overshot its goal - the liberation of man from material cares - and become a life-destructive obsession. Young people everywhere have been allowed to choose between love and the garbage disposal unit.

Everywhere they have chosen the garbage disposal unit. A totally different spiritual attitude has become essential - and it can only be brought into being by making our unconscious desires conscious and by creating entirely new ones. And by a *massive propaganda campaign* to publicize these desires." (pp. 18-19, emphasis in original)

II DESIRES, TRUE AND FALSE

That the "banality", the "catatonia" and the "exhaustion" the Situationists feel around them is really primarily *within themselves* and their own sense of life is, of course, a consideration that never occurs to them! (One is reminded of Cicero's observation that "Men who have no inner resources for a good and happy life find every age burdensome.") For is it not clear that once more we are in the company of Huxley's "perennial philosophy", the insane wailings of a diseased intellectual tradition which for centuries - millennia - has disparaged earthly existence and materialistic pleasures? However, even if the Situationists *were* right, and their sense of meaninglessness and banalization was shared by the vast majority, would that mean it was the correct and appropriate response to reality? Or would it rather mean that masses have been so bludgeoned and conditioned by the advocates of the anti-life nexus of values that they are unable to see and experience the true meaning of their lives and labour? But, of course, *real* analysis, real questioning and rational inquiry, has no place in the work of the Situationists. Indeed, no rational argument is *ever* advanced in support of their feverish denunciations. Just *why*, for example, are consumer goods - televisions, cars, washing machines etc. - "impoverished objects" which have "stopped us living"? (p. 49) No answer.

One wonders too what the average 'worker', the deified hero of the Situationists, would reply when glibly informed that his purchases, his consumer durables, are "phony" needs, "habits that were never needs in the first place but were quite blatantly manufactured by contemporary society" (p. 44). In the face of such perverse obtuseness, such stunningly irrational 'argument' (also a very common one among the many critics of advertising), it seems quite useless to point to the most natural and 'un-phony' desire (or need) of human beings to make their lives more comfortable by employing time, labour, and inconvenience-saving appliances. *By what standard*, then, do the Situationists sit in judgement upon the supposed 'phoniness' or 'genuineness' of contemporary life styles and the products of modern industry and technology?

If perhaps it is because such products were unknown, incomprehensible even, to our Stone Age ancestors, or even to those of a generation before us, it seems a strange and arbitrary return to puritanical asceticism to indict them for 'phoniness' on these grounds. Anyway, it is strange to see the newness, the "blatant manufacture", of contemporary consumption patterns and life-styles being condemned by those who previously told us of the desirability of "making our unconscious desires conscious and ... *creating entirely new ones*". (p. 19, emphasis mine) And just *how* do the Situationists know that contemporary habits are *not* true to our "unconscious desires"? Strange too from people who, as we shall see, in their next breath inform us that their envisaged future society will be one of the "satisfaction of the demands of the passions, (giving) individual desires whatever they need to use." (p. 159)

Who then are the Situationists to reject the "demands of the passions" of the contemporary workers, their alleged heroes? But even if the present consumption patterns and life-styles *were* completely the result of social influence and persuasion, why is this particular conditioning any the less morally acceptable than the "massive propaganda campaign" (p. 19), the "revolutionary propaganda" (p. 120) urged by the Situationists to alter the desires and tastes of the masses? Clearly, logic and consistency are also unnecessary bourgeois commodities for the Situationist.

III SITUATIONISM, MARXISM, AND 'ALIENATION'

Reading the puerile drivel of the Situationists can serve as an insight into more than the lunacy of merely this one collectivist cult. Modern Marx scholars have shown how it was the young Marx's critique of alienation which laid the foundations for the whole edifice of the mature system of "scientific socialism".³ It is in this

context, therefore, that the Situationists' analysis of "social alienation" can, I believe, help throw light upon the nature and motivation of *Marx's* analysis, and upon the motivation behind much Marxist and collectivist thought in general.

Of what, when one penetrates the abstruse and abstract terminology of Marx (and the other "alienationists"), do we really find the complaints against "alienation" to consist? Are they not simply a sustained metaphysical whining against a universe which doesn't allow one to have one's cake and eat it, a universe in which individual effort, choice, labour and the division of labour are necessary: a desire for the "redemption" of man from the "realm of necessity"? The Situationists' vision of "the permanent transformation of the world" (p. 106) most vividly underlines this age-old yearning for an effortless existence where every whim is miraculously fulfilled. Indeed, they quite accurately describe their own ideology as "*the collective politics of desire*" (p. 159, emphasis in original). It is a vision of a world characterized by "the satisfaction of the demands of the passions, (giving) individual desires whatever they need to use" (p. 159), of the "free construction of the whole space-time of individual life" (p. 26).

In such a world the "new rights of man" will be "the right to the material equipment necessary for the realization of their desires, the right to creativity, the right to the conquest of nature; the end of time as a commodity, the end of history-in-itself, the realization of art and the imaginary" (p. 160). It will be, they declare:

"... *an economy based on desire*. This could be formulated as: technological society plus the imagination to see what could be done with it." (p. 44)

"It will be a world of art made real ... It is the construction of situations: the free creation of immediate experience itself." (p. 45)

And so we are told that:

"Daydreaming could become the most powerful dynamo in the world. Modern technological expertise, just as it makes everything considered 'Utopia' in the past a purely practical undertaking today, also does away with the purely fairytale nature of dreams. All my wishes come true - from the moment that modern technology is put to their service." (p. 135)

The descriptions of the Situationists are far more understandable than Marx's turgid Hegelianisms. "At heart everyone wants to be God" (p. 132) is a far clearer but quite synonymous rendition of Marx's "genuine resolution of the conflict between Man and Nature ... the true resolution of the strife between existence and true being, between objectivation and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity." How much clearer is the yearning for the effortless 'godlike' existence in the Situationists' frank praise for "the magic of the imaginary, (where) things exist only to be picked up and toyed with, caressed, broken apart and put together again in any way one sees fit" (p. 135) than in Marx's convoluted abstractions concerning the "consummated unity in being of man and Nature, the true resurrection of Nature, the thorough-going humanism of Nature." How much more *honest* (if no more convincing) is the Situationists' *open* adulation of "the primitive-irrational play instinct" (p. 146) than Marx's obfuscating conceptions of "free conscious activity" and "self activity".

It was, of course, easier to maintain a suitably intellectual and 'scientific' dignity by confining oneself to obscure Hegelianisms. And Marx was also well aware from the earliest of the dangers of allowing his writings to descend to the mundane level of concrete detail in their conception of the future society, to the Fourieresque idiocies this would have inevitably involved. The Situationists' lack of caution, however, leaves one in no doubt as to the childish yearnings that lay behind the critique of "alienation". Consider their concept of "unitary urbanism", for example:

"Everyone will live in their own cathedral. There will be rooms awakening more vivid fantasies than any drug. There will be houses where it will be impossible not to fall in love. Other houses will prove irresistibly attractive to the benighted traveller ..." (p. 19)⁴

We can indeed be grateful to the Situationists, then, for their unambiguous revelation of what they themselves term the "prime import-

ance of subjectivity" (p. 135), their vivid demonstration of the psychological roots of so much (although by no means all) Marxist and collectivist thought. These roots can frequently be found to lie in a pathological revolt against reality, against the necessities and requirements of *human* existence. Such varieties of socialism are indeed a "politics of whim", and the more one explores their many political and intellectual manifestations the more one finds Ayn Rand's passionate indictment confirmed:

"The secret of all their esoteric philosophies, of all their dialectics and super-senses, of their evasive eyes, snarling words, the secret for which they destroy civilization, language, industries and lives, the secret for which they pierce their own eyes and eardrums, grind out their senses, blank out their minds, the purposes for which they dissolve the absolutes of reason, logic, matter, existence, reality - is to erect upon that plastic fog a single holy absolute: their *Wish*."⁵

IV ECONOMIC PLANNING

With what sort of politico-economic structure is it that the Situationists propose to achieve their "permanent transformation of the world"? We are glibly informed that "(t)oday, planned economy allows one to forsee the final solution to the problems of survival" (p.139), despite the fact that every planned economy throughout history had manifestly failed to produce anything except tyranny, misery, poverty, chaos and stagnation.⁶ But it hardly seems necessary to belabour the point that the Situationists possess not the slightest grain of knowledge regarding the realities of economy, industry and technology. Politically, for the Situationists, the organs of economic planning - indeed, the sole political structure - are to be "Workers' Councils":

"(W)e see an organisation as being revolutionary if it pursues *effectively*, drawing on the experience of the proletarian revolutions of this century, the *international and absolute power of the workers' councils*." (p. 106, emphasis mine)

"(R)evolutionary Workers' Councils which concentrate in themselves with all the functions of decision execution, and federate with each other by means of delegates responsible to the base and revocable at any moment." (p. 125)

Such Councils, we are informed, will be distinguished by "direct and total democracy; strictly mandated delegates subject to immediate recall: the abolition of hierarchy and of all detached specialization; the permanent creative participation of all ordinary people." (p. 153) And that's pretty much it. After a couple of centuries of the abject failure of such glittering generalities and nebulous concepts to result in practice in anything remotely resembling a free society one feels justified in asking for just a little more concrete description of the politico-economic mechanisms of the "new" society. But apparently not, for the Situationists inform us rather of "the *simplicity* of organization managed *directly* by everyone and for everyone". (p. 157, first emphasis mine)

Now, if history and the record of every collectivist experiment large and small proves anything, it is the staggering - in fact, insurmountable - difficulties and complexities of such a proposed organization. What happens to those individuals who do not wish to be "planned", who don't like the jobs assigned to them by their fellows, or who wish to produce, trade and associate freely and non-coercively with others outside the purview of the "absolute power of the workers' councils"? No answer. The Situationists rightly identify and reject as a ruling class the "socialist bureaucracy" of the Soviet bloc, the "bureaucrats of Moscow and Peking". But what guarantees do they offer to prevent the development of such "new classes", bureaucracies and elites in their envisaged society? No answer. Such issues are simply masked by a mantle of empty "dialectical" abstractions. Like such socialist and Marxist "individualists" as Stephen Lukes and Ellen M. Wood, advocates of a "dialectical" synthesis of individual and community,⁷ the Situationists ceaselessly speak of a "community whose interests are identical with those of the individual" (p. 147), the "participation of each individual in the self-realization of everyone else" (p. 131), and the "true harmonization of life in common" (p. 139) in a "collective takeover of the world" (p. 15). Thus the Situationists inform us that "(t)he private and the public cannot be crudely opposed to each

other for the very good reason that both sectors are equally alienated. The task of the new revolutionary movement will be precisely to transcend their antagonism.” (p.38)

V FORCE, FREEDOM AND SEPARATENESS

But the fact is that there can be no such thing as a “collective takeover of the world”, a “liberation which is at once individual and collective” (p. 156), a dissolution of “all forms of separation ... between public and private” (p. 22).

“Society”, “collective”, “public” are only convenient terms to designate individuals in the aggregate. They are not entities, have no bodies, minds, interests or real existence. Aims, action, thought and interest reside only and wholly in the individual. The “transcendence” of the “separation” between individual and the collective is, then, a literally *meaningless* abstraction. As long as individuals possess free will (the capacity for autonomous thought), differences in ideas, tastes, desires, and character, then “separations” will never be “transcended” - and quite rightly so! Such a “transcendence” would only be possible in an anhill of will-less, mindless automatons, not in a *human* society. And since only individuals exist, “planning” can only be *of some people by others*, the benefits of *some* always the sacrifices of *others*. There are no such things as “collective” decisions, participation, management, or “collective” anything else. Such floating abstractions regarding the alleged synthesis of individuals and community can only (and have always been) a mask for the domination of *some* individuals by others.

So what happens when an absolutely total unanimity does not reign in the “Workers’ Councils”, when “separations” do not magically disappear, and some individuals find the “plans” and “democratic” decisions of others not to their liking? The answer is clear - the return to “the right to impose popular will, by force of necessary” (p. 73).⁸ And so much for all the fine phrases about “permanent liberation” and “total freedom”, for we are back once more with that most basic of all “separations”, that between the rulers and the ruled.

But, of course, it should have been obvious from the start that the Situationists do not have the slightest *genuine* concern with freedom. Their mask is far too transparent to conceal that familiar, vicious and authoritarian face beneath, the same old desire to dominate, rule and coerce other people. If “(y)oung people everywhere have been *allowed* to choose between love and the garbage disposal unit” it is all too obvious that the Situationists would be quite overjoyed to remove the freedom to make such a choice! In fact we even find them rejoicing in a deterministic image of man, in contemporary experiments in brainwashing and conditioning.

Thus they quote approvingly Serge Chakotin’s conclusion in *The Rape of the Masses*, that “(h)enceforward people can be forced to act in ways predetermined without their knowledge” (p. 11)⁹ and comment gleefully:

“It is the whole humanistic, artistic, and juridical conception of the inviolable and unalterable personality which is condemned. Ourselves, we are only too happy to see it go. However, there should be no mistake about the fact that we are going to be caught up in a race between free artists and the police in experiment with and developing the use of these new techniques of conditioning.” (p. 12)

In other words, the only “total freedom” in a Situationist society would seem to be that of the “free artists” to condition the masses in order to secure the ‘right’ choices!¹⁰ Freedom is Slavery! Slavery is Freedom! And for any “counter-revolutionaries” who might prove recalcitrant enough to resist such conditioning, the simple “humane” solution of “liquidation” is prescribed:

“There can be no negotiation with the enemies of freedom, there’s no quarter which can be extended to man’s oppressors. The annihilation of counter-revolutionaries is the only humanitarian act ...” (p. 149)

“The working class shouldn’t hesitate to liquidate anyone who gets in the way of their desire for total freedom.” (p.152)

The heyday of the Situationist International is now fortunately over. But their influence, and the influence of similar ideologies, lives

on.¹¹ To combat an enemy, to eradicate a plague, one must first understand it. Hopefully, this thought might help sustain a few dedicated individuals through the tedium and nausea of reading *Leaving the Twentieth Century* and other Situationist works. It is indeed fortunate for the human race that there now exist truly individualist and libertarian movements which are actually dedicated to leading it out of the Twentieth Century - *into the Twenty First*, into a new world of greater freedom and prosperity and not, as would the Situationists, back into a Dark Ages of slavery and poverty.

NOTES

1. Translated and Edited by Christopher Gray, Free Fall Publications, London, 1974. All bracketed page references in the text are to this work.
2. This is even more manifest nonsense. Most precapitalist societies were characterized by a general lack of leisure for those outside their ruling classes. Capitalism gave leisure to its fortunate populations many of whom engage in the most strenuous leisure pastimes the Situationists have apparently never noticed: hundreds of sporting activities from surfing, athletics, football to martial arts; many varieties of motor and motorcycling sports; car customizing; rock, pop, and disco dancing; hundreds of different collecting hobbies; artistic hobbies; gardening and ‘DIY’ ... Need I go on? But, in the world of the higher nonsense, such mundane concrete examples, such issues as proof and disproof, are beneath consideration.
3. See, among many other works, Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, Cambridge University Press, 1961 and *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1970; David MacLellan, *Marx Before Marxism*, London, Macmillan, 1970 and *The Thought of Karl Marx: An Introduction*, London, Macmillan, 1971; Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, London, Routledge, 1962.
4. Since more recent anti-capitalist fashions stress the finitude of natural resources and capitalism’s alleged wastefulness, one wonders if the Situationists would now feel a trifle embarrassed over their advocacy of this somewhat cavalier treatment of those resources.
5. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, New York, Random House, 1957, pp. 1035-6. For an analysis of the works of Herbert Marcuse - which is remarkably similar in essentials to the Situationists - that draws the same conclusions regarding the desire for a “liberation from reality”, see Professor George Walsh, “Herbert Marcuse, Philosopher of the New Left”, Pt. 4, *The Objectivist*, December 1970.
6. On the failure of the largest experiment in “planned economy” see Antony C. Sutton’s three volume study, *Western Technology and Soviet Economic Development, 1917-65*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1970-73; for wider theoretical analyses, see John Jewkes, *New Ordeal by Planning*, London, Macmillan, 1968; F. A. Hayek, ed., *Collectivist Economic Planning*, New York, Augustus M. Kelley, 1967; Trygve Hoff, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Society*, London, William Hodge, 1949; Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action*, London, Hodge, 1949, pp. 649-711, and *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1951, pp. 111-220.
7. See Stephen Lukes, *Individualism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1978; G. A. Cohen, “Marx’s Dialectic of Labour”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Spring 1974, Vol. 3, No. 3; Ellen M. Wood, *Mind and Politics: An Approach to the Meaning of Liberal and Socialist Individualism*, University of California Press, 1973.
8. This phrase is used in their approving account of the Paris Commune.
9. Gray, the translator actually refers to Chakotin as “Tchakhotine” and his book as *The Rape of the Crowds By Political Propaganda*. My spelling is the customary one in English and the full title of the English edition of his book is *The Rape of the Masses: The Psychology of Totalitarian Political Propaganda*, London, Labour Book Service, 1940.
10. Exactly the same conclusion is reached by that other prophet of socialist “liberation”, Marcuse. In his essay, “Repressive Tolerance” he advocates a “democratic educational dictatorship of free men” (!), an elite of the wise and good to guide the ignorant masses. For an account see Walsh, op. cit., p. 11.
11. In June of 1989 the Institute of Contemporary Arts organized a large-scale celebratory show - “International Situationism, 1957-1972” - with seminars, special catalogues and a cinema season. Amusingly, the show roughly coincided with the revelation in America that Situationist leader Guy Debord had been a CIA agent. (See Adrian Dannatt, “Sometime a Great Notion?”, *The Times*, 21 June, 1989.) One wonders whether this was merely an example of straightforward personal corruption by Debord and information gathering by the CIA. Or was it a sophisticated ploy by the CIA to rot the minds of the Left and divert as many as possible into apparently harmless idiocies? If it was the latter, and occasionally Western intelligence agencies do indulge in attempted ideological sabotage operations, this was a sorely misjudged effort. Since when has manifest lunacy ever undermined the influence and impact of collectivist and statist movements and cults?