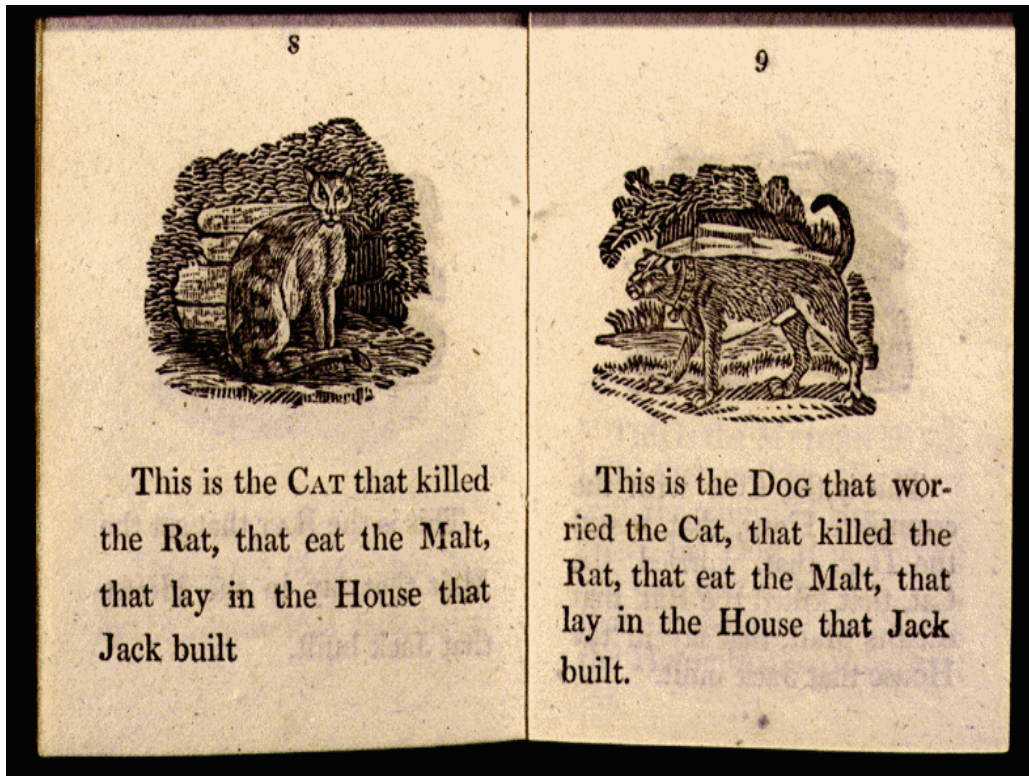


Towards a New Situationist International

“Perhaps he has secrets for *changing life*? No, he’s just looking for some, I told myself.”
(Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*, 1873)



1.

It is a brutal fact that the defining quality of proletarian life at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the foundation on which the everyday thought and action of ordinary people rests, is a craven acceptance of the separate commodity economy and the state as unchangeable givens. This practical submission exists *everywhere* in the advanced capitalist countries. It is not just a matter of the unthinking obedience of the many good children (of all ages) who have nearly always confined their thoughts, actions and desires to the *obviously* submissive conventions of their times. It is equally ubiquitous in the endless impotent complaints about fragments of social life, in the many varieties of contemporary cynicism that sneer as they obey, in the swaggering search for status and money of the urban gang member or the petty criminal, in the myriad campaigns for the reform of this or that unseemly fragment of everyday life, in the search for the cool, the spiritual or the perfect state of wasted oblivion; *and in your life and mine*, amongst many others.

2.

However, as well as submission, there is also a profound but buried discontent with the petty and idiotic lives that a world subordinated to the production and consumption of commodities obliges us to lead. This misery that dares not speak its name, this festering sense that we are *utterly* wasting our limited time on earth, may be evaded, repressed, or concealed behind a mask of happiness. It may be treated with therapies, religions, permitted holidays or forbidden drugs, a new family or a new job, or one of a multitude of other changes in our consumption of goods and ideologies. And yet, after everything, *it remains*. Indeed, a history of the changing means by which our sense of the profound inadequacy of life has been confusedly expressed, avoided and recuperated would be a history of much of the individual and social life of our epoch. As a corollary, the revival of revolutionary contestation precisely depends on the degree to which contemporary dissatisfaction can extricate itself from the consumerist, reformist and escapist forms into which it has been diverted and seduced over the last 30 or more years. In place of revolution, discontent with everyday life has attempted to find remedies in the new forms of work and consumption held out by a rejuvenated and increasingly sophisticated capitalism. The practical *negation* of this misadventure is the road to social revolution in our times.

3.

As *one* response to this desperate state of affairs, I propose the formation of an international association of situationist revolutionaries, *a new situationist international*. Such an association would in the first instance seek to *catalyze* the efforts of its presently scattered and isolated members by bringing them into intensive collaboration and discussion with each other. The efforts of revolutionaries to understand and contest the impoverishment of everyday life under contemporary capitalism (and first and foremost the impoverishment of their *own* everyday lives) have proved palpably inadequate. Notably, over the past several decades, revolutionary theory has almost completely failed to keep abreast of developments within advanced capitalism. In particular, it has failed to engage with the *devastatingly stultifying* notions of consumable happiness and human possibility with which the spectacle has come to secure an uneasy acquiescence amongst much of the working class. The new international would seek to intensify and deepen the theory and practice of its members; and to give them a *cumulative* breadth and power. At the same time, it would aim to *catalyze* dissatisfaction outside its ranks by providing inspiration to dissent, disquiet to obedience, and the *beginnings* of a practical theory to individuals who are moving towards the conclusion that social revolution is the only remedy for the poverty of their lives.

4.

The emphasis on a *situationist* international is a reflection of the simple fact that the thought of the first situationist international provides an unsurpassed theoretical resource for revolutionaries seeking to engage with capitalism under conditions of commodity abundance. In the twenty five or so years since the development of the situationist project

was largely abandoned, other theoretical lineages have had free reign to develop a more acute successor to it. Their efforts have only served to demonstrate the startling bankruptcy of Marxism, anarchism, academia, the new social movements, and the arts. Of course, here and there one can find small fragments of insight that can be put to good use when torn out of their original context and reintegrated into a new critique. In general, however, the legacy of self-styled revolutionary thought in the last quarter of a century is one of anachronism, obscurantism and timid reformism. It has not *advanced* the revolutionary critique of the capitalism that actually exists but *fled* from it.

5.

In 1964 the Situationist International said of the term ‘situationist’: “For the moment, however ridiculous a label may be, ours has the merit of drawing a sharp line between the previous incoherence and a new level of rigour” (Questionnaire, *Internationale Situationniste* #9, 1964). One can hardly say the same today. As situationist thought has been abandoned by individuals with revolutionary intent, it has been taken up in traduced form by legions of students, academics, architects, artists and commentators. Its critique of alienated everyday life has been discarded, attenuated or rendered devoid of subversive consequences for the everyday lives of those who handle it. As a result, far from being a badge of rigour, the adjective ‘situationist’ is now typically to be found attached to specialised tools of toothless analysis or justifications for inane artistic or leisure activities. This may seem to make it an unpropitious moment to take up again the situationist label. However, revolutionary theory cannot simply ignore or lament its recuperation by the dominant society; rather, it must *confront* it. One *virtue* of a revival of an *avowedly* situationist revolutionary movement is precisely that it will bring these two hostile forces into *open conflict* with each other. In this way, the sophisticated critique of modern conditions can be cleansed of the repellent taint of academicism and returned to the streets, where it belongs. At the same time, a revived situationist theoretico-practice must engage with the proliferating reformist ideologies that address the distinctively modern maladies of everyday life without indulging in any overt reference to situationist theory. As the more obvious costs and miseries of the expanded consumer society of the past thirty years become flagrant, pseudo-critiques of (and pseudo-remedies for) ‘consumerism’, ‘affluenza’ and stubbornly static levels of ‘happiness’ and ‘well-being’ increasingly clamour for the attention of the spectator and the policy-maker. In response, those who believe that the poverties of everyday life are matters of correctable *excesses* within the world of alienated work and alienated consumption must find themselves opposed by the proponents of a *revolutionary* solution for the interconnected misery of everything that exists. Those who would reform social, political and economic life so as to prevent our uniquely modern discontents from running out of control must be met *as enemies* by those who would have such discontents develop a conscious, coherent and practical expression.

6.

There can be no question of simply *reviving* the Situationist International that was dissolved in 1972. It would be *absurd* to think of the practices, organizational form and theoretical propositions of the situationists as providing a fixed set of prescriptions that need only be dusted down and put back into use. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that revolutionary theory and practice stands at present in a state of *perfectly scandalous dereliction*. For example, according to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, in 2009 American children aged 8-18 spend an average of 7.38 hours a day, seven days a week, using the various media the society of the spectacle makes available. The corresponding statistics for adults are hardly more encouraging. *Where* can one find radical critiques of the particular ideas of contentment and excitement, or the general forms of desirable life, that this torrent of alienated representation endlessly parades before its spectators? *Where* might the satisfied spectator or the burgeoning malcontent encounter a revolutionary theory that is sympathetically alive to what contemporary spectacles promise (and to some degree deliver) and yet is uncompromising in its critique of the lived realities? *Where* might workers weary of their unhappy dance to an unchosen dirge find a critique of work that extends as far as the well-paid and secure employment that remains preponderant in the advanced western economies? It would not be very much of an exaggeration to answer: *nowhere*. Inaugurating a *modernized* contestation of the advanced, affluent capitalism of our era will be at the heart of what the new international seeks to do. *Everything* must be reconsidered and brought up to date so as to ensure we have the theoretical and practical tools that are required *today*. The lessons of the past (including those of the *failure* of the Situationist International) must be learned. The *real* social changes that have occurred since the heyday of the Situationist International (and their *consequences* for revolutionary theory and practice) must be recognized.

7.

The new situationist international cannot be a collectivity that serves as a cause for the militant, a shelter for the passive, a source of vicarious status or activity for its members generally, or a self-perpetuating mechanism for organizing the organization. As an association of *individuals*, it would serve to bring together the particular persons who happen to be its members at any given time for the particular purposes of producing theory (both individually or in concert with one or more other members) and carrying out actions (both individually and in concert with other members). Theoretical statements and other practical actions would be carried out in the *individual* names of those who produce them, and on their responsibility *alone*. Every member would be expected to *participate* in the life of the association by using it for one or more of the purposes for which it was created. Every decision that concerns the association should be taken by the members as a whole, either directly or by way of mandated delegates, and in general the association should be *egalitarian* in nature. Members would be free to carry out projects outside the framework of the international and to form other associations to do so.

8.

The new international must recognize that there are no currents within the intelligentsia or amongst artists from which an 'avant-garde' might be formed. That is all dead and gone; art and the academy are now wholly integrated within the dominant society. In any event, every last vestige of the *unmitigatedly disastrous* notion of the vanguard party must now be repudiated. The new international would not be "a general staff", not even one "that does not want troops" (The Counter-Situationist Campaign in Various Countries, *Internationale Situationniste* #8, 1963). It would not be a separate grouping of intellectuals whose thought and instructions the proletariat need only absorb and act on. It would not consist of individuals who claim to possess unusual abilities or see themselves as having *already* transcended the sordid, stupid and miserable lives that everybody else leads. Rather, its members would be, and would see themselves as being, *perfectly ordinary proletarians*. Their arrival at the view that social revolution is necessary, desirable and possible in advance of others is of no more significance than the lumps that sometimes appear when a sauce is first stirred; they may be early but they are not special. As can be seen from the long history of failed revolutions (a history that has repeatedly seen revolutionary workers fatally abandon the making of decisions to specialised bodies who claim to represent them), social revolution depends on proletarians acting and thinking at all stages *by and for themselves*. For this reason, although the new situationist international will publish its theory, it must do so solely in order to encourage other proletarians who wish to understand and suppress their misery to pursue an *autonomous* contestation of their own alienation. In the revolutionary army without officers, drills or uniforms, there must *only* be foot-soldiers.

9.

It might be objected that a proposal such as this one can avoid an abhorrent abstraction only to the extent that it is an immediately realizable suggestion for a collaboration between known individuals. It might also be objected that it is not obvious whether and where associates in a new international can at present be found. If I fail to heed these weighty objections, it is because I hope that the public appearance of the notion of a new international will, over time, help to crystallize from the currents of history the forces it needs for its realization.

10.

In the event that individuals prepared to create and work actively within a twenty-first century situationist international *do* come forward, I would suggest that the next step should be a conference between the interested parties. This should preferably be a face-to-face meeting; but if that proves impracticable, it could be conducted by post or e-mail. Each participant should be required to present beforehand his or her written views on (a) the minimum definition of 'situationist' for the purposes of the association; (b) the best organizational structure and procedures to be adopted; (c) the practical purposes to which the association should be put; (d) the contribution (theoretical, practical or financial) that he or she personally proposes to make to the association in its initial stages; and (e) any

other questions that he or she wishes to have discussed at the conference. Individuals who are unable or unwilling to do this, or cannot specify any *concrete* steps which they themselves would take within the proposed association, should be excluded from the conference. We might save ourselves a little time by excluding from the outset anyone who holds an academic position or is a public practitioner of art. Such assiduous prostration before the dominant forms of diminished thought and action is necessarily inconsistent with participation in an association whose only goal is the revolutionary transformation of the totality of everyday life. At the same time, it may well be necessary to defend the incipient association from being overwhelmed by that widespread credulousness that seems prepared to believe almost *anything*, as long as it places capitalism or the state in an unfavourable light. As a convenient rule of thumb, the new international might reject anyone who believes that the attacks of 11th September, 2001 were orchestrated by the American state. Nothing but confusion can be expected from an individual whose standards of acceptable evidence and argument are *this* low.

11.

If an accord can at length be reached as to the terms and form of a new international, its inauguration should be made contingent on the successful production of a first issue of a journal. A journal is, of course, not an end in itself. On the contrary, it is merely one of the means by which its writers and readers seek to develop *firstly* a practical understanding of the constituent elements of contemporary alienation and the forces of repression, mystification, seduction and pseudo-critique that it brings to bear against dissatisfaction and revolt, and *secondly* a practical communication with other radically disaffected individuals and groups. Yet, an association that cannot even produce a single issue of a journal is unlikely to achieve anything else of substance. It would be better if it never was born.

12.

If serious discussions about the creation of a new situationist international are entered into, *everything* written above will be open to debate and alteration.

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