

*I*NTERNATIONALE *S*ITUATIONNISTE:
COUNTERING *A*MERICAN *I*NFLUENCE IN
*P*OST-*W*AR *F*RANCE

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Introduction

The United States attempted to enforce cultural hegemony throughout Western Europe in the aftermath of World War II. The United States attempted to create the artistic equivalent of the Marshall Plan as a bulwark against the threat of communist influence. Through the promotion of avant-garde styles like Abstract-Expressionism,¹ it wished to present another face of the capitalist world, one that showed an acceptance of artistic liberty ostensibly lacking in the nations of the Soviet bloc. These actions collided with Europe's own artistic trends as well as with a multifarious collection of cultural and economic philosophies, some of which were distinctly opposed to the capitalistic and consumer-based economies that the United States encouraged. The rejection of the American and Soviet artistic ideals and influences is connected to the multiple countercultural movements in Western European countries during the post-war period.

The Situationist International in France was one such movement. Organized by writer and filmmaker Guy Debord in 1957, the Situationists grew out of the Lettrist movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Situationists were principally Marxist in their philosophical leanings but carried their influence beyond economics into the cultural realm. They inherited, with reservations, the philosophical line carried over from the Dadaists and the Surrealists. They protested the culture of consumption

1. Francis Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 254.

that they believed overtook Europe through the promotion of “spectacle” and a self-conscious Avant-Garde at the expense of a more direct creativity.² Their influence culminated in the Paris riots in 1968 when student protesters at the Sorbonne precipitated a massive general strike throughout France. The Situationist International movement officially ended in 1972 but its influence reaches beyond, first into the nascent punk scene of the mid-1970s England and by extension into “culture-jamming” movements of today.³

This essay will identify the Situationist movement as a reaction to American cultural influence in post-war Europe. While existing scholarship recognizes the Situationists’ place in the continuum of the European Avant-Garde and the Situationists’ rejection of native consumer trends, the current historiography fails to connect a similar rejection of American cultural hegemony. Using the writings of proto-Situationists Henri Lefebvre and Isidor Isou, Situationists Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and others in the movement as well as newspaper and journal accounts, this essay will first position the Situationist movement within the specifically European artistic and philosophical context of its precursors, Dadaism, Surrealism and Marxism. Drawing from the many Situationist writings, as well as secondary source material like Frances Stonor-Saunders’ *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, the Situationists’ reactions to post-war European economic and cultural trends, particularly those shaped by American influence, will be analyzed. In conclusion, current examples of the Situationists’ continuing influence in what is broadly termed “counterculture” will be argued. Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces* provides an in-depth history of the Situationist movement and considers its influence on modern artistic trends, while Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter’s *Nation of Rebels* takes a critical look at how such causes have in turn affected more recent Western political change.

Political and Cultural Background

As the Cold War developed in the aftermath of World War II, elements within the American government deemed it necessary to project

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2. Timothy Clark, “The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution,” *Situationist International Online* <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/modernart.html> (accessed Oct. 18, 2011).
 3. Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York: Harper Business, 2004), 1.

specific cultural ideals both domestically and internationally. This effort at cultural imperialism resulted in interesting bedfellows as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) became a de facto Ministry of Culture in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁴ The CIA and the United States Department of State supported film projects, art exhibits and concerts designed both to project a favorable image of America abroad and to depict capitalism in a positive light.⁵ With the encouragement of politicians and intellectuals like Nelson Rockefeller and Arthur Schlesinger, the government provided support to certain types of art not normally associated with the conservative elements prominent in the federal government at that time, such as Abstract-Expressionism⁶ and modern jazz.⁷

The Situationists developed and operated within a cultural milieu increasingly subject to the influence of the United States. They recognized the cultural infiltration and both rejected the economic and commercial pressure that the United States placed on Western Europe and rejected much of the Western Avant-Garde art.⁸ They viewed the modern avant-garde as inherently susceptible to appropriation by the consumer market, becoming both “desirable and ineffectual” to the populace.⁹ The Situationists viewed themselves as continuing on the path set by the Dadaists and to a lesser extent the Surrealists, who in the aftermath of two immensely destructive world wars viewed art and life as requiring a more anarchic and at the same time a more playful and intuitive approach.¹⁰

The Dadaist movement, led by writers Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara and sculptor Hans Arp, became prominent in 1916. Influenced by the Italian Futurists to a degree, they did not share the Futurists’ enthusiasm for machines, technology or warfare. Indeed, it was the Dadaists’ repul-

4. Michael Kammen, “Culture and the State in America,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (December 1996): 798.

5. Saunders, 1.

6. *Ibid.*, 257-258.

7. Walter Hixton, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 117.

8. Guy Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action,” *Situationist International Online* <http://cddc/vt/edu/sionline/si/report.html> (accessed Sept 29, 2011).

9. Helmut Sturm, “The Avant-Garde is Undesirable,” excerpted, *Situationist International Online* <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/undesirable.html> (accessed Dec 12, 2011).

10. “The Meaning of Decay in Art,” *Internationale Situationniste* 3 (December 1959): 3.

sion at the slaughter of World War I that led to their rejection of much of what modern society offered. They recognized that a civilization capable of such destruction required a rethinking of its very basic philosophical, and by extension, artistic beliefs.¹¹ They argued against poetry that extolled the beauty of “flowers and vases” under such conditions¹² and developed the concept of “anti-art” whereby artists directed their media towards a radical deconstruction of everything modern society stood for: its religion, politics, even – excepting themselves – its art.¹³ Influenced by writer Alfred Jarry, the Dadists utilized humor in their art, but in contrast to the aloof irony found in the Romantics, it directly manifested itself in “the heroic attitude of those who are unwilling to compromise.”¹⁴

In the midst of a clash with Tzara, poet/writer André Breton and fellow poets Paul Éluard and Benjamin Péret broke with Dadaism in 1922. They became the founders of Surrealism, a movement that recognized that recent political and scientific developments required the imposition of “a new point of view” in order to further the aims of Dadaism.¹⁵ The uncertainties of the post-World War I civilization that led to the Depression and the Second World War, along with the implications of scientific discoveries such as general relativity¹⁶ precipitated a different direction than the “destructive anarchism” of Dada. The surrealists wanted to explore the unconscious and the hallucinatory and to circumvent traditional reason and logic. They held the traditional novel in special disdain as its internal logic merely fulfilled the expectations of the reader and yet at the same time reflected a mechanistic worldview no longer tenable. It its place the Surrealist writers

11. Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 152.

12. Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965), 44.

13. *Ibid.*, 62-63.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 79.

16. Einstein's Theory of General Relativity demonstrated, among other things, the equivalence between acceleration and gravity, and the fact that time is variable with respect to the relative motion of the observers. This completely changed the popular concept of time as an unalterable aspect of existence. Einstein, Albert *The Meaning of Relativity*, Fifth ed. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1956), 56-57.

substituted techniques like automatic writing¹⁷ which bypassed the rational mind and revealed truth (they believed) in its purist sense.¹⁸

Both the Situationists and the Lettrists, recognized Dada and Surrealism as important influences to their own movements. However, they viewed them both, and Surrealists in particular, with varying degrees of ambiguousness. Michèle Bernstein, a member of both the Situationists and the Lettrists, stated “everyone is the son of many fathers. There was the father we hated, which was Surrealism, and there was the father we loved, which was Dada.”¹⁹ Influenced by Dadaism’s anarchic tendencies, the Situationists and their precursors believed that the Surrealists over-internalized the movement and never overcame the same “class culture” infecting modern society, rendering its art politically impotent.²⁰

The Founding of the Situationists

Guy Debord founded the Situationists in 1957 as a former member of Isidor Isou’s proto-deconstructionist association, Lettrist International movement. Anticipating some of the ideas that Jacques Derrida later codified, the Lettrists stripped literature to its most basic element, the letter.²¹ By focusing on the sound of the letter, Isou believed that the artist could bypass language and meaning and speak directly to the imagination.²² Isou’s philosophy was not merely a literary affectation but an act of subversion demonstrated by his disruption of a play by Tzara on January 21, 1946, after which he expounded on his Lettrist theories to the subsequently nearly empty house. The Lettrists created further disturbances by announcing

17. *Automatic writing* is a technique whereby the writer produces unconsciously often under a trance or some other kind of altered state; Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2007), 31-32.

18. Nadeau, 81-83.

19. Marcus Greil, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth-Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1991), 181.

20. Manifesto,” *Reflex 1* (September-October 1948), *Situationist International Online* <http://cdddc/vt/edu/sionline/presitu/manifesto.html> (accessed Sept 28, 2011).

21. Thomas Hecken and Agata Grzenia, “Situationism” in *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977*, ed. Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 23.

22. David W. Seaman, ed., “Selections from the Manifestos of Isidore Isou” *Kaldren Lettriste Page-Isidore Isou Manifestos*, <http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/lettrist/isou-m.htm> (accessed Sept 28, 2011).

the death of God at a mass in Notre Dame²³ and by starting a publication called *Le Dictature lettriste* (The Lettrist Dictatorship) which the public, hostile to such a title in the immediate aftermath of the fascist domination of Europe, received dubiously.²⁴ Those involved in the movement reasserted and surpassed the artistic and politically anarchist qualities of Dadaism that they believed lost.²⁵

With the formation of Situationism, Debord expanded upon Isou's theories and applied them to the realm of cultural critique. Debord recognized post-war European society's failure come to terms with the psychological and political issues of the Dadaists and the true Marxists²⁶ as well as the influences of consumerism.²⁷ In the years following the Second World War, the United States felt the need to assert a strong capitalist presence as a buffer against further communist influence in Western Europe. In order to sustain growth and profitability in consumer-based economies, an ever-increasing acquisition of goods and services would be required in post-war Europe. In 1947, amidst an extremely bitter winter, economic collapse threatened Europe. Currency was almost worthless; there were widespread strikes and a flourishing black market. On June fifth of the same year, Secretary of State George Marshall announced a plan for American aid to Western Europe, which came to be known as the Marshall Plan.²⁸

The Marshall Plan

The Marshall Plan's purpose was to fund the general reconstruction of Europe. As part of this strategy, administrators used it to invite comparisons between French workers and their counterparts in the United States, both in terms of their productivity and, as a natural consequence, their purchasing power. It was important to demonstrate, for example, that an American car cost the average American worker nine months' wages while

23. Hecken and Grzenia, 23.

24. Greil, 252.

25. *Ibid.*, 251-253.

26. "The Meaning of Decay in Art," *Internationale Situationniste* 3 (December 1959), <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/decay.html> (accessed Oct 18, 2011).

27. Guy Debord, "Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life," *Internationale Situationniste* 6 (August 1962), <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/everyday.html> (accessed Oct 18, 2011).

28. Saunders, 24-25.

a French car cost a French worker two and a half years' pay.²⁹ By the early 1950s Americans established "productivity centers" in France. These centers and their business consultants showcased American factory equipment in order to increase French economic output and subsequently, the standard of living and the resources to support a military defense.³⁰ The United States ran into opposition from the French Communist party and its affiliated trade union, the *Confederation generale du travail*. Although many saw the virtue of such an industrial reconstruction due to the fact that workers often described French industrial units as "dark, dingy factories with filthy floors and horrible noise"³¹, the union opposition caused even those not directly affiliated with the Communist party to reject the American efforts.

Concurrently, the CIA began secretly funneling money to conservative parties in France (as well as Italy) in order to thwart the efforts of their respective Communist parties.³² Despite continued resistance to the Marshall Plan and other forms of perceived American interference, by the mid-1950s the French economy had made substantial gains. Various events during this period led France to align itself with the U.S. and the rest of the NATO countries.³³ Anti-American sentiment lingered, however, especially among the "intelligentsia". Their arguments were represented by mainstream publications like *Le Monde*³⁴ who warned of an encroaching consumer society similar to the United States' "joyless materialism", characterized by "sidewalk preachers, poor blacks and flag waving crowds"³⁵ and ultimately, the death of culture.³⁶

American Cultural Influence

The American attempt at exerting cultural influence in Western Europe developed in the context of the early Cold War. The Soviet Union em-

29. Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 71.

30. *Ibid.*, 72.

31. *Ibid.*, 81.

32. Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans have Loved, Hated and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 54.

33. Kuisel, 103.

34. *Ibid.*, 108.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Kuisel, 111.

barked on a campaign of influence right after the war's end beginning with staged opera performances in Berlin and culminating in 1947 Berlin with the opening of their "House of Culture".³⁷ The West had nothing comparable to offer and were thus exposed to the Soviet propaganda that Americans were "gum-chewing, Chevy-driving, Dupont-sheathed philistines."³⁸ The institution of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) represented the inauguration of American cultural influence. The CCF represented itself as an ostensibly benign governmental organization established to showcase American art, literature and music. In reality, however, it was an operation backed by the CIA.³⁹ Initially known as the Berlin Congress, the CCF came in to being early in 1950 as a meeting of anti-Stalinist and ex-communist intellectuals. With the support of Frank Wisner, a former head of secret intelligence of the Office of Strategic Services (a precursor to the CIA),⁴⁰ the Berlin Congress changed its name to the Congress for Cultural Freedom and moved its offices to Paris at the end of 1950.⁴¹

The ineffective way America combatted the pro-communist elements in France concerned Wisner. French ignorance about, and apathy towards, American culture at the time exacerbated the problem. Post-war popular sentiment in France was neutralist and not interested in aligning economically, militarily or otherwise, either with the United States or with the Soviet Union. Not a satisfactory position to Washington, officials felt that unless they adequately clarified American "diplomacy" and culture to European intellectuals, America was in danger of losing ground in the Cold War.⁴² By obtaining Marshall Plan funds from the CIA, the CCF was assured of all the financing it would need to promote its agenda.⁴³ Within twenty years, CCF had offices in over thirty countries.

In Paris in 1951 under the direction of composer Nicolas Nabokov, the CCF published its first magazine, *Preuves* (meaning *Proof*). Nabokov designed it to compete with neutralist newspapers like *Le Monde* and pro-communist journals like *Les Temps moderne* by presenting a pro-American,

37. Saunders, 18.

38. Ibid., 19.

39. Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 79.

40. Saunders, 40-41.

41. Ibid., 86.

42. Pells, 67-69.

43. Saunders, 71-72.

pro-“freedom” alternative, and to draw followers away from popular French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, a supporter of the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ Much of the French public immediately viewed *Preuves* with suspicion, questioning its legitimacy as well as its source of funding. The French public could easily associate American “freedom” with American capitalism.⁴⁵

Rather than view the conflation of culture, capitalism and consumerism in post-war Europe as merely a CIA fueled conspiracy theory, the actions of the of the United States’ government through its programs to minimize further Soviet influence is well documented. The Situationists recognized that consumer culture worked hand in hand with the capitalist economy. They also understood that culture and entertainment often comprised the largest expenditures by private citizens in modern nations outside of economic necessities. Based on these facts, the Situationists believed that such a society would ultimately reach a point where entertainment comprised the main focus of both individuals and the public at large. The creation of and participation in this “spectacle” would ultimately leave humanity with neither true freedom nor a means to fully participate in the political structure of their respective countries. The promise of greater “spectacle” would reduce people to mere “production machines” led by and further indoctrinated into maintaining the status quo by the messages thus projected.⁴⁶

To Debord and the Situationists the promotion of American cultural influence throughout the 1950s and 1960s validated the dangers they believed France and Western Europe faced. Not only did they perceive the forcing of American ideals upon the French as cultural imperialism, but also as a direct attack on true creativity.⁴⁷ In his book *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Situationist Raoul Vaneigem called this society the “dictatorship of consumer goods,”⁴⁸ quoting president Eisenhower who said “to save the economy we must buy, buy anything,”⁴⁹ Vaneigem saw modern

44. Ibid., 101.

45. Kuisel, 46.

46. Guy Debord, *Ingirum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (Stirling: AK Press, 1991), 3-7.

47. Guy DeBord, “Report,” 13.

48. Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, The Situationist International Text Library (1967), <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/66> (accessed December 10, 2011): chapter 20.

49. Vaneigem, chapter 7.

“Not only did they perceive the forcing of American ideals upon the French as cultural imperialism, but also as a direct attack on true creativity.”

societies' comforts and entertainments merely as self-perpetuating drugs which had little more to offer than boredom, a boredom borne out by the fact that for all their collective efforts and experiences, people are in reality more isolated than ever. They have acceded to the consumerist vision of society even against their own interests.⁵⁰

Situationism

According to Debord and his followers, the alternative to such a society was, Situationism, a word that refers to the idea that specific moments in life must reflect a perpetual quality of passion. Each “situation” must be inspired by the purpose of the specific moment in time and not by the arbitrary molds of identification that people unknowingly accept as a component of contemporary culture. “In a classless society there will no longer be ‘painters,’ but only situationists who, among other things, sometimes paint.”⁵¹ Here Debord is reacting in part to the “US avant-garde” colony in Paris and worked “in the most tame, insipidly conformist manner, isolated ideologically, socially and even ecologically from everything else going on” as well as all those of the West who in continuing acts of cultural imperialism appropriated artistic ideals from the Third World.⁵²

We should not however, view the Situationists' focus on art as merely an exercise in aesthetics. They carried a definite revolutionary context along with their denunciations. One of Situationist criticisms of Dada was that “it painted pictures on the Mona Lisa instead of razing the Louvre”⁵³ and ever after art has solely been an appendage to the “spectacle,” an integral part of... modern capitalism.”⁵⁴ This spectacle includes Abstract-Expressionism, Andy Warhol's Pop Art, and everyone involved in the “CIA-

50. Debord, *Ingirum*, 9-11.

51. DeBord, “Report,” 13.

52. Ibid, 8.

53. Clark, 2.

54. Ibid., 7.

subsidized torpor of the latest New Left.”⁵⁵ Any true art, must therefore must be both an outgrowth of and a catalyst for the “social disruptions” that the Situationists wished to bring about.⁵⁶

The Situationists inherited this revolutionary ethos from Marx via Henri Lefevre, a French theorist of critical Marxism and urban sociology.⁵⁷ In concurrence with Lefevre, the Situationists believed that recent followers of Marx always “dropped the chestnut when it got too hot for them”⁵⁸ and never followed Marx’s paradigm through to its logical end. Thus Debord stated that the revolution represented by the Situationist International is not merely for the purpose of “determining the level of industrial production” or “who is to be the master of such production” – as representatives of the New Left would have it – but is meant to address the very “desires” of society in order to understand them as products of the current political/economic system.⁵⁹ They also broke with traditional Marxism by recognizing that socialism’s appropriation of all private property leads to greater insularity of private “human qualities,” depriving society of individual creativity and rendering humans “useless and socially non-existent.”⁶⁰ These criticisms illustrate that the Situationists recognized American-style capitalism and Soviet-style communism as equally invested in the annexation of private wants and creativity for the purpose of maintaining power and the spectacle.

Debord outlined the Situationist views in his most famous book *The Society of the Spectacle*. Published in 1967, the book consists of 221 numbered paragraphs where Debord delineates how life under “modern conditions of production”⁶¹ inevitably leads to a society ruled by spectacle. He states that production requires consumption in order to maintain itself

55. Ibid., 11.

56. Ibid., 12.

57. Lefevre worked to establish Marxism as a cultural theory and in volume 1 of his *Critique of Everyday Life* (originally published in 1948) stated that “subverting the everyday will open the way to. . . the real life.”

58. Attila Kotanyi, “The Next Stage,” *Internationale Situationniste* 7 (April 1962), *Situationist International Online* <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/nextstage.html> (accessed October 18, 2011).

59. DeBord, “Report,” 9.

60. Asger Jorn, “The End of the Economy and the Realization of Art,” *Internationale Situationniste* 4 (June 1960), *Situationist International Online* <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/economy.html> (accessed October 18, 2011).

61. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), paragraph 1.

“According to Debord, the growth of consumerist society has led to the increasing fragmentation of time and life in general.”

and consumption requires advertisement (propaganda) in order to promote itself; therefore the entire socio-economic system is geared towards the provision of continual enticement for the population at large.⁶² According to Debord, the growth of consumerist society has led to the increasing fragmentation of time and life in general. Society has divided time and life into segments representing

production and leisure, and the divisions into social classes further reflect this fragmentation. Debord further connects “consumable time” to the United States and its populations’ average television viewing of up to six hours a day. This particular medium’s “advantage” allows for the consumption of image as well as time thus reproducing the “spectacle” with ever more intensity.⁶³

There is a Marxist thrust to Debord’s arguments within *The Society of the Spectacle*, however he intended to completely distinguish his Situationist ideas from Leninist/Stalinist modes, which he recognized as equally insidious in their effect on individuals and greater society. Debord in turn recognized progressive politics as essentially inadequate to the needs of the modern populace. He believed that progressive movements realized only a few local successes in their attempts to “overthrow the economic infrastructure of exploitation.”⁶⁴ This stance is something that intellectuals, in particular elements of the New Left⁶⁵, often criticized the Situationists for, accusing them of having abandoned art for politics to the detriment of both. T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith refute this charge by stating that the Situationists’s actions were to realize through political action “fifty years of modernist experiment on the borders of the category.”⁶⁶ In other words, ideas regarding representation are just as applicable to politics as to art.

Clark and Nicholson-Smith additionally view the critics from the

62. Ibid., paragraph 6.

63. Ibid., paragraphs 152-153.

64. DeBord, “Report,” 1.

65. Klimke, 3.

66. T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, “Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International,” *October* 79 (1997): 29.

New Left, and its publication the *New Left Review*, as apologists for the most nefarious aspects of communism such as the Great Terror, forced collectivization, and suppression of the East German and Hungarian revolts,⁶⁷ facets that “left the Situationists cold.”⁶⁸ That the Stalinist leanings of such groups were, as with capitalism, promoted and allowed to flourish due to their own uses of the “spectacle” and likewise a problem for the Situationists. This gave lie to the Communist Party’s assertion that they embodied the working classes and their interests within.⁶⁹ Under these modern communist regimes, man is still a “commodity”⁷⁰ According to Debord, as of 1958, the old cultural “superstructures” are still in place and at odds with the “progressive individual” who is still treated as a tool of production due to the lack of a true communist revolution.⁷¹

Critics pointed to the Situationists’ practice of expelling members for association with bourgeois society, much like the New Left Communists.⁷² However, this was not necessarily due to political considerations but to the Situationists’ desire to keep art and other cultural trappings from becoming fodder for the “commodity economy.” They promoted the recycling of cultural cast-offs into new forms with new meanings and contexts.⁷³ Not only is art saved from commodification (or becoming part of the “spectacle”) but the very ideological symbols of modern civilization, both communist and capitalist, are subverted. This subversion refers to the Marxist theory of *reification* in which societal abstractions become concretized into notions of permanence. Thus the United States turned the concept of the “free market” into a general and protected ideal in the service of the commodity system.⁷⁴ The Situationists believed that reification and commodification were both inextricable aspects of modern society to which some of their members could potentially succumb. However, through the creation of “situations” and techniques such as the *dérive*, people could neutralize

67. Ibid., 17-18.

68. Ibid., 20.

69. Ibid., 25.

70. Guy Debord, “Theses on the Cultural Revolution” *October* 79 (1997): 90.

71. Ibid., 91.

72. Hecken and Grzenia, 26.

73. Edward Ball, “The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International,” *Yale French Studies* 73(1987): 25.

74. Ibid., 26.

the power of these forces.⁷⁵

Dérive is one of the terms the Situationists used to refer to the creation of self-referential moments in life unmoored from the roles determined by consumer society. The *dérive* is an exercise used to explore the hidden aspects of a city, in both the physical and psychological sense. It is a walk, but one that involves “playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and [is] thus quite different from classic notions of journey or stroll.”⁷⁶ Its purpose is to discover the “gravitational” forces within a city and thus abandon oneself to them. Random meetings are prearranged in which the participants know neither where they will take place nor who is participating.⁷⁷ In this way the participants “drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action”⁷⁸ and, at least for a while, are free from the directives of the consumer culture.

Isou’s seemingly benign Lettrism, in reality an act of revolution, should be viewed as one would view the *dérive*. A similar and equally important Situationist tactic is the *detournement*. The idea of *detournement* is to disrupt, even minimally, the homogeneity of everyday life and hope that such “offences” would cause a chain reaction. This chain reaction will then cause a reversal of society’s trajectory toward the “spectacle.”⁷⁹ An example is Debord and fellow Situationist Asger Jorn’s book *Memoires*, which exploited previously copyrighted material printed in fragments and physically bound in sandpaper in order to ruin any books next to it on the shelves.⁸⁰ By these attempts at realigning one’s relationship to society, the Situationists’ wished to go beyond even Karl Marx and actually reinvent society from the ground up by taking themselves outside of the capitalist consumer machine represented in its most obvious form by the United States, to reject the enforced conformity of the communist countries, and to undermine the very ideals of production as held by both economic systems.

75. Ibid., 27-28, 31.

76. Guy DeBord, “The Theory of Derive,” *Les Livres Nues* 9 (November 1956), *Situationist International Online* <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html> (accessed October 15, 2011).

77. Ibid., 3.

78. Ibid., 1.

79. Ball, 32.

80. Ibid.

Revolts and Riots

These superficially non-threatening attempts at cultural destabilization had very real consequences in the mid-to late 1960s, leading to revolts across Europe and the United States. In 1968 a student revolt at the Sorbonne University of Paris, further precipitated a huge general strike across France. In addition to the many pamphlets and manifestos published by the Situationists, they also disseminated their ideas through posters and comics. By these means radical student groups, including those at the University of Strasbourg, adopted much of the Situationist philosophy. In 1966 the elected student representatives created a scandal and a minor revolt when they used university funds to distribute an essay called "On the Poverty of Student Life" co-written with the Situationist International.⁸¹ This essay portrayed the supposed worldwide "rise of the students" then heralded by leftist intellectuals as an important progressive movement, as merely concomitant with "overdeveloped capitalism"⁸² The students portrayed their financial poverty as rivaling that of the lowest of the working classes, and what awaited them after having suffered through their school years was the life of a "low level functionary" in service to the consumer oriented society.⁸³ Therefore, according to the Situationists, the unrest of the mid-1960s was just an attempt to glean some form of meaning out of their condition. The political action of the students was yet another application of the "spectacle" through which, for all their criticism of the then current French DeGaulle regime, they merely aligned themselves with the crimes of Stalin, Mao et al. And the Left's desire to therefore "reintegrate the university into social and economic life" is simply another means of serving the commodity system.⁸⁴

According to the Situationists, the only way for students to truly institute a revolution was to rebel against their studies, which were by definition creations and servants of capitalism. Using the Paris Commune

81. Hecken, 27.

82. Members of the Situationist International and Students of Strasbourg University, "On the Poverty of Student Life: Considering its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Especially Intellectual Aspects, With a Modest Proposal for Doing Away With It," <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/poverty.htm> (accessed December 12, 2011), chapter 1.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

of 1871⁸⁵ as a positive example; Debord's essay indicated that without that kind of commitment to a change in the social order no revolution would have any worthwhile meaning.⁸⁶ The students at Strasbourg did revolt and occupy the University for a time, and this had important ramifications two years later in May of 1968 when students occupied the Sorbonne at the University of Paris. This spawned further occupations of other universities and led to a widespread general strike of ten million workers, some of whom took over factories. Ultimately, the Situationists pulled their support from the movement due to the lingering "Stalinist illusions" of some of its leaders.⁸⁷

The Situationists gave full support in the Los Angeles Watts' riots of 1965. In an article entitled "The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy" published in 1965, Debord put forth some of his strongest and most pointed arguments regarding modern capitalism. In this essay he apprehends the impetus behind the Watts' riots, seeing them as a justified reaction against "the world of commodity," "the spectacle" of which inner-city minorities had no chance of being a part.⁸⁸ Both the looting and the arson brought into focus the ultimate contradictions of the American economic system. Debord interprets the theft of appliances by those who can't afford to pay their electric bill and the burning of their own neighborhood as the ultimate ironic display of the failure of the "affluent society."⁸⁹ These actions uncovered the underlying structure of said society: "the army, the police and the other specialized detachments of the state's monopoly of armed violence."⁹⁰ Debord turns on its head the criticism that the people involved in the riots betrayed "animal behavior."⁹¹ He states this accusation is levied by a society that has treated humans as objects of commerce and conversely infuses objects with human qualities,

85. W. Scott Haine, *The World of the Paris Café: Sociability among the French Working Class, 1789-1914* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 219-221.

86. *Ibid.*

87. Hecken, 27.

88. Guy DeBord, "The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy," *Internationale Situationniste* 10 (March 1966), *Situationist International Online* <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/decline.html> (accessed September 28, 2011).

89. *Ibid.*, 3.

90. *Ibid.*

91. DeBord, "The Decline," 6.

resulting in an overreaction to the destruction of such objects.⁹²

The African-American population in Los Angeles was responding as the group who suffered most from the alienation inherent in modern society. Surrounded by the real and implied opulence of Southern California, their fate was to aspire to the commodity, but never to attain it, and thus represent the lowest rung of the hierarchy required by the present system. The racism they faced was merely a never-ending aspect of this arrangement. Of this Debord wrote, “This is why *this American society itself must disappear* — in America and everywhere else in the world.”⁹³ The spectacle’s greatest representation is in the United States, and economic and cultural forces had disseminated the specifically American facets of it worldwide.

Conclusion

The decades following World War II found the United States in a constant struggle to maintain its cultural and economic hegemony over Western Europe and to keep its NATO allies firmly in the capitalist camp. Neutralism and non-alignment were unacceptable. In addition to providing economic support under the guise of the Marshall Plan, the U.S. State Department created organizations like the Congress for Cultural Freedom in order to promote America as a country of cultural import, and to support those types of art not directly linked to radical propaganda. Backed by the CIA, the CCF organized concerts and art exhibits and produced publications throughout Europe and the rest of the world. These would directly combat the similar policies that the Soviet Union incorporated.

France became one of the most important battlegrounds in this cultural war. Many of the French expressed the desire to remain neutral with respect to the developing Cold War, and many others openly joined the French Communist Party and were outwardly sympathetic to the USSR.⁹⁴ Thus, with the help of Marshall Plan funds, the CCF maintained a strong presence in Paris, promoting the ideal American life to the French people.⁹⁵ This involved a restructuring of France’s industrial system to

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.

94. Kuisel, 74-75.

95. Hixton, 12.

reflect the more efficient American model and, more importantly, instilling a desire for mass consumption in order to keep the economic engines moving.

Led by Guy Debord, the Situationists believed that as this consumer culture increased its hold over France it would result in a greater loss of individual freedom. They believed that people would become absorbed into the “spectacle” and would thus never question their place in the line of production. Likewise, all art produced in such a society would only be made at the behest of capitalist forces which would drain it of all real meaning. Consequently, it was through writing, art and certain kinds of play like the *dérive* that they could trigger a true revolution that would in turn affect the economic systems under which they lived. This conviction borne out in part by the student revolt and general strikes that took place in 1968.⁹⁶

Although the Situationist International officially disbanded in 1972, their legacy would surface a few years later when a former member, Malcolm McLaren, put together a band called the Sex Pistols who created much the same kind of artistic disruption that Debord and his followers had.⁹⁷ The punk movement, initially a small culture dedicated to the deconstruction of cultural artifacts, created a revolution with an artistic reach extending beyond that of the Situationists and it remains controversial. Reflections of Situationist ideals are also found in the anti-globalization movements like the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle⁹⁸ and in books such as Naomi Klein’s 2000 book *No Logo* in which she criticizes the selling of lifestyles linked to brand names like Nike and Starbucks.⁹⁹ The latest incarnation of the Situationists’ ideal is found in the Occupy Wall Street movement. While not associated with any concurrent artistic sensibility, the Occupy Wall Street participants are defiantly putting a public face on the failures of the commodity system.

96. Hecken, 27.

97. Marcus, 19.

98. Heath, 5.

99. *Ibid.*, 328-330.