

Anatomy of a Scandal

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Now that the integration of young people into the society of the spectacle is an obvious fact, when the substitutes for protest, often inspired by its most despicable sector, the universities, can hardly conceal the desire to incorporate their participants into the prosaic world of consumers, a scandal like that of Strasbourg tends to be interpreted as a large-scale esthetic operation, a kind of high-level *performance*, by means of which the Situationist International attained a preeminently artistic notoriety. Nothing could be further from the truth: it was “by no means a spectacular action, but a scandalous intervention carried out by enemies of the spectacle”.¹ The purpose of the scandal was to reveal the rejection of the standardized, servile and alienated lifestyle that was making inroads among the youth, by means of an unacceptable action against the educational institutions. It did not originate so much in the dissolution of a handful of bureaucratized student associations in precipitous decline, as in the opportunity to disseminate a radical critique of the living conditions within a developing commodity society. The main goal was therefore the publication of the “most scandalous pamphlet of the century”, but the circumstances that preceded its publication, and persisted for some time, were not merely incidental backdrops. We must not forget that the Strasbourg scandal was the precursor to a scandal on a much greater scale: the scandal of May ’68. As we delve into the details of its origins and subsequent development and attempt to shed some light on its little corner of history, we do not encounter a uniform group of clever intellectuals in complete lockstep with their associated team of young people who were eager to “practice theory” come hell or high water. Personality conflicts, a desire to have some fun, various states of mind, elective affinities, antipathies and resentments—in short, all kinds of differences and degrees of consciousness—played an important role in the whole affair, as we shall see, for, as someone once said, history is not made without passion, and therefore even the most rational intervention conceivable, the intervention whose goal is the revolution, is more the product of enthusiasms, longings and fits of passion than of cold calculation.

If everything has a beginning, the beginning to this story must be sought in the friendship struck up among a group of Henri Lefebvre’s students, Béchir Tlili, Mustapha Khayati, Jean Garnault and the brother and sister, Theo and Edith Frey, who shared “the same ideas and the same preoccupations”. They were impressed when they read the first installment of “Basic Banalities”, a text by Vaneigem that was published in the seventh issue of the journal, *Internationale Situationniste*. Béchir, who was enrolled in the PhD program in sociology, had obtained a copy of

¹ Letter from Debord to Hervé Vernay, December 26, 1966, *Correspondance*, Vol. 3, Fayard, 2003.

the journal for his comrades. He was personally acquainted with Debord, since he had worked with him in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and had supported Debord's criticisms of Castoriadis, the group's Pope. As Khayati said, with respect to the group's fascination with Vaneigem's text, "we didn't stop discussing it during our daily meetings in the cafeteria of the university restaurant, Gallia, called the 'Minotaur'".² The eighth issue of the journal came out in January 1963 and this small group of friends was then able to read the second part of "Basic Banalities", and acquired a more in-depth understanding of the situationist critique. Béchir and Mustapha contacted Debord, as did other sympathizers over the course of the years 1963–1964, including the Englishman Sean Wilder, and André Bertrand, an anarchist involved with the Anarchist Federation. Daniel Joubert—former editor of the Bordeaux journal, *Critical Notes*—and Béchir Tlili were known at the University of Strasbourg as "the situationists",³ despite Debord's mistrust of, and scorn for, Joubert. The Tunisians had other interests besides agitation in France, however: Mustapha, who had even fantasized about the formation of a *Maquis* in The Vosges mountains to support the Algerian insurrection,⁴ had been in contact with the editors of *Perspectives tunisiennes*, a socialist publication directed by a handful of Tunisian students that was open to all "leftist" tendencies. On this question, Mustapha openly disagreed with Béchir. In August 1964, the ninth issue of *Internationale Situationniste* was published, which contained the article, "Correspondence with a Cybernetician", a scathing critique of the professor Abraham Moles, a friend of Lefebvre's. Debord had broken off relations with Lefebvre for various reasons: on the one hand, due to the discrepancies between the radicality demanded by their investigations on urbanism and everyday life, and the conformism of an academic lifestyle compounded from concessions; on the other hand, because of petty grudges. The ostensible reason was Lefebvre's plagiarism of certain situationist theses on the Paris Commune, which the situationists denounced in a pamphlet.⁵ Moles was scheduled to preside at a conference at the university with the techno-artist Nicolas Schöffer, and for Debord this seemed to be a perfect opportunity for sabotage. This plan met with the enthusiastic approval of the Strasbourg group, except for Béchir, whose reservations about Mustapha's relations with the [Tunisian] "Perspectivists" led him to tacitly cut off relations with Khayati. Debord, however, who considered Béchir to be the representative of the SI in Strasbourg "simply in his capacity as a 'Marxist'", decided to set this problem aside and plunge ahead. Arrangements were made with Khayati and his comrades to print "Correspondence with a Cybernetician" as a separate pamphlet, along with another pamphlet signed by Khayati's group, for distribution on the day of the conference. Debord and Michèle Bernstein respectively suggested the titles, "Dialogue between the Robot and the Sign" (Moles being the Robot, and Schöffer the Sign), and "The Tortoise in the Showcase", since "the tortoise is the preeminently cybernetic animal, and the showcase is Schöffer's artistic ideal, and also a well-known vehicle for exhibiting prostitutes in Hamburg".⁶ On March 24, Moles' speech was interrupted by the distribution of the "Correspondence" and the "Tortoise" pamphlet signed by Theo, Edith, Jean and Mustapha. Debord was elated: "This is the tone to employ with these robots; it is necessary to worry them about the future; to insult

² Interview with Mustapha Khayati conducted by Gérard Berréby, Brussels, July 4, 2014, in *Rien n'est fini, tout commence*, by Gérard Berréby and Raoul Vaneigem, Allia, Paris, 2014.

³ Letter from Debord to B. Tlili, April 15, 1964, *Correspondance*, Vol. 2, Fayard, Paris, 2003.

⁴ At least this is what Lefebvre claimed in an interview published in the catalog, *Figures de la négation, Avant-gardes du dépassement de l'art que faisait suite à l'exposition*, VV.AA., Paris Musées, 2004.

⁵ "Aux poubelles de l'histoire!", published in issue No. 12 of *Internationale Situationniste*.

⁶ Letter from Debord to M. Khayati, March 20, 1965, *Correspondance*, Vol. 3.

them in the present on several selected occasions and not to enter into a too serious refutation of what isn't serious (on the theoretical level).⁷ After this incident, the Strasbourgers entered into a closer collaboration with the SI as soon as the opportunity to intervene in the Algerian crisis arose.

Debord had already considered approaching the Arab world through a critique of the authoritarian and bureaucratic populism of Ben Bella, which was responsible for the defeat of the Algerian revolution. Khayati came up with the idea of distributing a pamphlet at the Festival of Youth in Algiers. He discussed its possible contents with Debord, who said that “the main thing is to give the impression of a new revolutionary frame of reference that will extend its critique and encounter everywhere the *real movement that abolishes the existing conditions*, but which is still largely unaware of its goals and the choices they imply.”⁸ Boumedienne's successful June 19th coup d'état against Ben Bella, rather than aborting the plan to produce the pamphlet, only gave it some new contents. On June 30, thanks to Theo Frey's assistance in drafting the text, it was now ready for printing; the title adopted was “Address to the Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries”. An Algerian student, Nasri Boumechal, went to Algiers and distributed it through the mail in Algeria. Debord and Garnault were trying to identify people in Europe who should receive the pamphlet by mail. The project's scope expanded, as the text of the “Address...” was intended to be published in pamphlet form in various languages. Theo and Edith attempted to translate it into German and Polish; meanwhile, an Argentinian artist was supposed to translate it into Spanish. By the summer of 1965, the Strasbourg group, after making the requisite trips to Paris and Brussels, was now part of the SI and was planning various contributions for the tenth issue of the journal. The Strasbourgers were invited to pursue their studies in the capital so they could collaborate more closely with the Parisian nucleus (Debord, Viénet, Bernstein). Garnault, at least, rented an apartment in Paris for a while. The translations proved to be difficult; the Arab version posed specific typographical problems; the Polish and Danish versions were never satisfactorily completed, but the German version turned out to be a success because the situationists could count on the assistance of a young German-speaking individual, Herbert Holl, who was familiar with the situationist theses. Garnault let Holl stay at his apartment temporarily while he was in Algiers, where he verified, *in situ*, the warm welcome that greeted the pamphlet. Khayati had also received positive reports. Far from constituting an obstacle to understanding, the SI's Marxist-Hegelian language “can be understood wherever conditions lead people to pose real revolutionary problems”.⁹ In November, the pamphlet was ready for distribution, and an analytical text on the next stage of development of the new regime, “The Class Struggles in Algeria”, written by Debord and Khayati, was also discussed; the latter text would be printed in the form of a poster one month later. The situation was favorable: Vaneigem had finished his *Traité de savoir-vivre...*, Debord was almost finished with his *Society of the Spectacle*, two new members had just joined the SI (the Romanian exile, Anton Hartstein, and Holl), and a new project was taking shape, a pamphlet in English celebrating the uprising in Watts, a neighborhood in southern Los Angeles inhabited by people of color, as an illustration of the social collapse of capitalism at its American pole. The title was inspired by Gibbon's masterpiece, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.¹⁰ At first, Sean Wilder, a subscriber to the journal, was asked to translate the text, but

⁷ Letter to M. Khayati, March 31, 1965.

⁸ Letter to M. Khayati, June 7, 1965.

⁹ Letter to M. Khayati, October 22, 1965.

¹⁰ “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy”.

since he lived in Toulouse, the task was assigned to a bilingual Englishman living in Paris, Donald Nicholson-Smith. Finally, the Strasbourg group traveled to Paris to help finish drafting the texts for the tenth issue of the journal, and two Strasbourgers served on its editorial committee (Khayati and Frey). The tenth issue went on sale in March of 1966.

The Strasbourg group fulfilled their obligations and the journal contained three of their articles, written on a reasonably high theoretical level. The texts by Theo (“Perspectives for a Generation”) and Jean (“The Elementary Structures of Reification”) clearly reflected their readings of Marx, Lukacs and the SI, as well as the yet-unpublished manuscripts of Debord and Vaneigem. Mustapha drafted an outline project for liberating words (“Captive Words. Preface to a Situationist Dictionary”). These texts undoubtedly served as a spur for the recent arrivals, Anton, Herbert and Donald, who plunged into reading without pause to attain “sufficient theoretical knowledge” and to confront the task of writing some of the entries for Khayati’s situationist dictionary, or the further elaboration of some of the themes evoked by Vaneigem in his text, “Some Theoretical Topics That Need To Be Dealt With Without Academic Debate or Idle Speculation”. Jean and Mustapha made plans to move to Paris. Everything was taking place in a congenial atmosphere characterized by shared goals, with solid analyses and exemplary interventions upon which those analyses were based. Even Herbert seemed to overcome his problems communicating with Debord. At the University of Strasbourg, meanwhile, all kinds of people were to be seen: Daniel Joubert, who had renounced his Christian faith; Sean Wilder, André Bertrand and René Fugler, well-known anarchists; and a whole gang of vaguely libertarian persons, whose sympathies extended from Stirner to Makhno and Durruti, by way of the Dadaists and Surrealists. They did not associate with the local situationists; when they came across them in the Minotaure cafeteria they ignored them, and the situationists treated them the same way. Fugler was not viewed with approval by the situationists, who accused him of not understanding, and distorting, their ideas; and they did not like Joubert, either.

When the autumn elections for AFGES were announced (General Federated Association of the Students of Strasbourg, the local branch of UNEF), some of Fugler’s comrades along with a few other like-minded persons registered as candidates. They had no program but they clearly manifested their intention to criticize in acts the old student unionism.¹¹ It must be said that this student unionism was for the most part disregarded by the students. Of the 16,000 students at Strasbourg, only 350 were members of AFGES. Thus, on May 15, with all of 35 votes in their favor, five against and ten abstentions, a slate of six candidates was elected to lead AFGES (André Schneider, Bruno Vayr-Piova, Marlene Badener, Dominique Lambert, Roby Grunenwals and André Simon). Anxious lest these newly-elected officials should founder without any direction because of their lack of specific plans, Bertrand, who was in close contact with the victorious candidates, informed Debord of the “seizure of power” at the Strasbourg chapter of UNEF, which placed significant funds, facilities and other resources at the disposal of the new executive bureau of the local student union. In June, Bertrand and Sean met with Debord in Paris, at a café on the Place de Contrescarpe, to explain the affair in detail. Debord then suggested the possibility of publishing a scandalous text that would subject both the student milieu and class society to ridicule. A couple of weeks of meetings with the SI would suffice. Of course, Debord asked for a substantial sum of money for the situationists, for their “advisors” and their experts in demo-

¹¹ René Furth (Fugler), “Souvenirs d’un militant”, *Le Monde libertaire*, No. 1411, June 25, 2006.

lition. He delegated Khayati and the other Strasbourg situationists to serve as mediators with those whom he referred to as the “neo-Strasbourgians”.

At that time, the SI’s most pressing concern was to find a way to overcome its status as a vanguard by re-defining itself as a revolutionary organization, a stage in the radical critique destined to self-dissolution in the revolutionary movement as soon as the latter is unleashed and is deeply imbued with that critique. The Seventh Conference of the SI took place in Paris on July 9–11; it was attended by Michèle Bernstein, Guy Debord, Edith Frey, Theo Frey, Herbert Holl, Jean Garnault, Mustapha Khayati, Anton Hartstein, Ndjangani Lungela, J.V. Martin, Jan Strijbosch, Donald Nicholson-Smith, Raoul Vaneigem and René Viénet. The first point on the agenda, and the most important, was naturally the question of organization. The serious problem of the inactivity of some of the members of the SI was denounced, along with the theoretical inadequacy of other members. The SI was not an “intellectual guild”, a group of “thinkers” spinning theories alien to everyday life. Nor was it a haven for radical ideologues whose ideologies stood in stark contrast to the misery of their daily lives, or for sectarians incapable of communicating their theories to the forces that were seeking to realize them in practice. The revolutionary organization cannot reproduce within its ranks the hierarchies typical of domination. Its members must prove themselves to be consistent with the critique that they produce and this can only be achieved by practicing it. The document, “Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organizations”,¹² approved at the conclusion of the Conference, was a perfect synthesis of the discussions that had taken place there.¹³ Jan Strijbosch and Rudi Renson were given their walking papers for being contemplatives. Anton was sent packing shortly afterwards, as much for his theoretical deficiencies as for a certain indiscretion involving the organization’s finances. Lungela left for the Congo in August. In compensation, Christopher Gray and Charles Radcliffe, the editors of *Heatwave*, published in London, were in contact with the SI. The actual manner by which the situationist analysis was supposed to penetrate—“as their own unknown theory”—the masses while the latter are fully engaged in a frontal assault against this society, had yet to be discerned, but one fortuitous circumstance, the AFGES election, would provide a unique opportunity to try to get a glimpse of what it might be like.

Once the students and the Strasbourg situationists agreed on the advisability of producing the pamphlet, a series of meetings was scheduled to write it collectively. The very heterogeneity of the group that composed the new leadership of AFGES prevented anything of quality from being written collectively with its members in such a short time-frame. As a result, Khayati was forced to write it himself. Their understanding of the situationist theses left much to be desired, and so did the resolve on the part of some of the students to stay the course to the end. Debord contributed some ideas by mail. The pamphlet should have very long title, with an explicit reference to UNEF, and should be divided into three parts, each of which should be introduced by a quotation from Marx. It must excoriate with contempt the student as such, it must contain insults against religion, since the students are just like provincial old ladies when it comes to Christianity, and it must sustain a violent tone from beginning to end. It should not contain any comic strips, although they would be good for publicity, in the form of leaflets or a posters. The pamphlet was written and ready for the printer by the end of October.

¹² Published in *Internationale Situationniste*, No. 11.

¹³ A good analysis of the Conference may be found in Gianfranco Marelli, *L’amère victoire du situationnisme*, Editions Sulliver, Arles, 1998.

In the meantime, on October 26, taking advantage of the opportunity afforded by the first class of the year in social psychology taught by a professor who had long been known to the situationists, certain assailants pelted their helpless victim Abraham Moles with tomatoes, and Debord ironically named the action, “Operation Robot”; “you could say that Moles has finally seen the Spirit of the Time appear in the form of a tomato”.¹⁴ The plot almost didn’t come off: some of the conspirators refused to participate in the tomato barrage or to follow through with the plan to the end. Khayati had to work hard to convince the hesitant that scandals are not made half-way.¹⁵ Insensible to discouragement, Debord recommended the further politicization of the atmosphere with a provocative telegram expressing UNEF’s solidarity with the Zengakuren and the Revolutionary Communist League of Japan, which would be recited over a loudspeaker at the university restaurant, Gallia, the property of AFGES. In addition, the AFGES students’ cultural center, “Le Caveau”, was transformed into a rock music venue and opened up to working class youths and “*blousons noirs*”.¹⁶ The first issue of the mimeographed AFGES bulletin remained firmly entrenched in the policy of provocation, featuring a communiqué from the American group, Black Mask, on the Watts riots, an article in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution against the Soviet bureaucracy, a critique of the “Provo” movement in Holland, and an article praising the Zengakuren. An impressive comic strip constructed of *detournements*, the work of André Bertrand—“The Return of the Durruti Column”—was plastered all over the walls of the university. An evocative title: the Column, when it entered a town, liquidated the ruling class and proclaimed the social revolution.

On November 22, during the official inaugural celebration of the beginning of the academic year at the University, in the presence of academic authorities and other prominent figures, with the professors in their gowns and the public divided into two halves, men on one side and women on the other, while the Marseillaise was being played, a pamphlet was distributed as a supplement to issue No. 16 of *21–27 Étudiants de France*. The pamphlet had a green cover, and bore a strange title: *De la misère en milieu étudiant considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier* [On the Poverty of Student Life Considered in Its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Especially Intellectual Aspects, With a Modest Proposal for Its Remedy]. Ten thousand copies of the pamphlet were printed, and the printer was paid with AFGES funds. The content, of an incomparable extremism, according to *Le Monde* (December 9, 1966), “constitutes a systematic rejection of all forms of social and political organization in the West and the East, and of all the groups that are currently trying to change them”.

The next day, André Schneider, the president of the Strasbourg chapter of AFGES, flanked by Joubert and Khayati, announced a press conference to read a communiqué. Only three local reporters showed up. The communiqué began as follows: “In view of the extremely decomposed condition of student unionism, we took over the General Federated Association of the Students of Strasbourg, although no one can say that they were deceived with regard to our intentions. We never concealed our contempt for student unionism, the caricature of a working class trade unionism that was defeated a long time ago; we took possession of the General Association to confirm its demise, rather than rebuild it from its ruins. The dissolution of the Association is one

¹⁴ Letter to M. Khayati, October 27, 1966.

¹⁵ Pascal Dumontier, *Les Situationnistes et mai 1968. Théorie et pratique de la révolution*, éditions Gérard Lebovici, Paris, 1990. A manuscript of the book was consulted at the IISH in Amsterdam.

¹⁶ Christophe Bourseiller, *Vie et mort de Guy Debord*, Plon, Paris, 1999.

of our principal objectives.” Schneider disavowed any connection with the “beatniks” (“rather like our extreme right wing”), or with the “provos” (“too bourgeois”). The Revolutionary Communist League of Japan was more to his taste, for it is training “the kamikazes of the great moment that is to come”.

“On the Poverty of Student Life...” was extensively quoted in the media and the reaction was immediate: “The Student Association of Strasbourg Has Been Handed Over to Situationist Beatniks” (*Le Nouvel Alsacien*); “A Handful of Anarchist Dreamers Has Taken Control of UNEF” (*L’Aurore*); “after its May elections AFGES became the prisoner of a group of illuminati, with revolutionary or in any case nihilist pretensions, since they believe that the revolution is carried out by dissolving and destroying all social structures, beginning with student and working class trade unionism” (*L’Alsace*); “The ‘situationism’ International has seized power among the students at Strasbourg ... thanks to the general silence of the Strasbourg students who, in their vast majority, do not participate in the activities of the local UNEF chapter” (*Le Monde*); “the beatniks have seized power in the Strasbourg students’ association” (*Le Figaro*); finally, according to Rector Bayen, “these students, half provos, half beatniks, only represent a tiny minority of the students. They should be dealt with by psychiatrists” (*Paris-Presse*).

The new AFGES executive bureau thought that it was important to set the record straight concerning its relation to the situationists and to refute certain false allegations. In its communiqué of November 29 they stated: “None of the members of our Bureau belongs to the Situationist International, a movement which for some time has published a journal of the same name, but we declare ourselves in complete solidarity with its analyses and perspectives.” And they added: “the situationist movement can by no means be defined as ‘anarchist’, and even less as post-surrealist. The positions that it has elaborated are clearly Marxist. At the present time, it can be said that they are the only real Marxists, to the best of our knowledge.” The SI expressed its complete support for everything the executive bureau of AFGES did, in a letter sent to Schneider and Vayr-Piova, President and Vice President of AFGES, respectively.

The attacks in the press had only just begun: “The stupid end of UNEF.... Order no longer reigns in Strasbourg. It doesn’t matter! The fact that so many years of progressive militancy have handed over student unionism to such riffraff says a great deal about the failure of UNEF” (*Minute*). “The revolutionary students of Strasbourg have engaged in an operation whose purpose is the systematic destruction of social structures” (*Le Figaro*); “Is Student Unionism on Vacation?” (once again, *Le Figaro*); “Let’s get one thing straight; the situationist youths of Strasbourg are against everything [...] against the university that according to them manufactures the managerial cadres of a society without freedom; against the professors, the cadres of the factory in question” (*Le Figaro*, again). *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Monde*, the preferred newspapers of the student milieu, were somewhat more objective.

Debord and Donald Nicholson-Smith discreetly journeyed to Strasbourg in December, discussing the next moves with their comrades, getting updates, attempting to provide some practical advice, making contact with a Dutch student who had been attracted to the affair, Tony Verlaan, a future member of the American Section, etc. Throughout the month of December, there was a series of journeys back and forth between Strasbourg and Paris made by Garnault, Frey, Holl and Mustapha, and also others, such as Tony, Bertrand and Joubert. The approaching judicial offensive was nothing to fear. There still remained the real crowning moment of the scandal, slated for UNEF’s upcoming national congress.

The right wing associations of the Friends of AFGES held a press conference at the School of Law and announced their intention to seek legal redress against the new executive bureau of AFGES and at the same time to form a kind of parallel administration supported by the students. Business interests that depended on the union were at stake. On December 7, these associations, along with the association of former members of AFGES, the Vice-Mayor and a handful of prominent local figures, filed a complaint with the Supreme Court of Strasbourg. On December 13, the chief magistrate, judge Llabador, issued an injunction to place AFGES under the proxy supervision of a judicial administrator, shut down its offices and other facilities and prohibit the convening of the general assembly scheduled for December 16. His justification for these measures merits repeating: “One need only read what the accused have written for it to be obvious that these five students, scarcely more than adolescents, lacking any experience of real life, their minds confused by ill-digested philosophical, social, political and economic theories and bored by the drab monotony of their everyday life, have the pathetic arrogance to make sweeping denunciations of their fellow students, their professors, God, religion, the clergy, and the governments and political and social systems of the entire world. Rejecting all morality and legal restraint, these cynics do not shrink from to advocating theft, the destruction of scholarship, the abolition of work, total subversion and a permanent worldwide proletarian revolution with ‘unrestrained pleasure’ as its only goal.”¹⁷ The executive bureau filed an appeal against the injunction and also decided to convene the general assembly scheduled for the 16th. Four hundred people attended the general assembly. They voted to defy the judge’s order and condemned the machinations of the Friends of AFGES. Significantly, no vote was taken on the question of the dissolution of AFGES, which was the original reason for holding the assembly, and further debate on the issue was postponed until the upcoming UNEF congress, where a more far-reaching motion to dissolve UNEF itself would be proposed.

At the end of December the second issue of *Nouvelles*, the bulletin of AFGES, was distributed, featuring a report by the executive bureau entitled, “Balance Sheet and Prospects”. The bureau circulated a manifesto signed by Jean and Theo, from the SI, and by Schneider and Vayr-Piova, on behalf of the bureau, which bore the title, “And It’s Only Just Begun” [“Et ça ne fait que commencer”]. It began with the quotation from judge Llabador reproduced above and then continued as follows: “A specter haunts the world: the specter of revolution. All the powers of the old world have joined forces in a Holy Alliance to destroy it: the Judiciary and the Press, the self-proclaimed communists leashed to the priests, the senator and his ‘students’. This alliance needs the scandal of our presence. And every new stage of repression is forced to confirm our analysis in every detail. The public reactions that have greeted our declared project of sabotaging this miserable union have unmasked complicities that are shocking to those who do not know how to read them. Afraid of losing their ritual and imaginary opposition, the powers that be have come to the rescue of the last of the Mohicans of UNEF. [...] Now that the judiciary and the moribund UNEF have awakened to refurbish their tarnished reputations, AFGES is already dead. Our job is done here; we will arise again somewhere else, on other terrains. You have not heard the last from the Situationist International, and you will continue to hear about it until the advent of the international power of the Workers Councils.” And while the affair was still front page news, the Christmas holidays put the movement on hold. The pamphlet was distributed as widely as possible and the first edition was soon out of print.

¹⁷ Olivier Todd, “Strasbourg en situation...”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, December 21, 1966.

When the schools reopened in January, the first session of the annual general assembly of the National Students Union of France (UNEF) convened in Paris, attended by a delegation from Strasbourg. On January 11, Vayr-Piova, in his capacity as President of the Administrative Council of the MNEF, the National Mutual Fund of the Students of France, which was the funding source for the operations of the university psychological clinics, the BAPU [Bureau d'aide psychologique universitaire], read a "Notice" decreeing the closing of the BAPU at Strasbourg: "considering that the BAPUs are the manifestation in the student milieu of repressive psychiatry's parapolice control, whose obvious function is to maintain ... the passivity of all exploited sectors.... The BAPU tend to adapt the student to certain unacceptable existing conditions, which generate problems for which society itself is responsible. We demand above all a radical transformation of this society", and he also called for the closure of all BAPU facilities and for all their funds to be used instead for paying for a new edition of the pamphlet, "On the Poverty of Student Life...". And if this was not clear enough for the stunned audience, René Viénet, who had been appointed to serve on the Strasbourg delegation, then slowly and deliberately read the text of the pamphlet aloud to the assembled delegates. The bureaucrats of the student associations, especially the Stalinists, began to shout and scream at the top of their lungs. But this insult was only followed by another.

At the beginning of the UNEF general assembly session on the 14th, the Strasbourg delegation demanded an immediate vote on the motion to dissolve UNEF in its entirety, "considering that the UNEF declared itself a union uniting the vanguard of youth (Charter of Grenoble, 1946) at a time when labor unionism had long since been defeated and turned into a tool for the self-regulation of modern capitalism, working to integrate the working class into the commodity system; ... considering that the vanguardist pretension of the UNEF is constantly belied by its subreformist slogans and practice; ... considering that student unionism is a pure and simple farce and that it is urgent to put an end to it." The motion concluded with an appeal "to all revolutionary students of the world ... to join all the exploited people of their countries in undertaking a relentless struggle against all aspects of the old world, with the aim of contributing toward the international power of workers councils". The motion was rejected, of course, but it did win the support of the delegation from Nantes and of the students in convalescent homes. The scandal had spread from the local to the national arena, but then an incident occurred that put an end to the situationist intervention.

A circular of the SI summarized the proceedings of a meeting held on the 15th at which it was established that Khayati was the target of slanderous accusations leveled at him by Theo Frey, Garnault and Holl, "for tactical reasons and to camouflage their own maneuvers", which resulted in the expulsion of Khayati's accusers from the SI. On January 16, those same individuals, along with Edith Frey, who was not present at the meeting, submitted their resignations, offering "*post festum*" justifications for their actions, the main ones being the inability of the SI to overcome its status as "a group of theoreticians" and to transform itself into a serious revolutionary organization, the mediator between theory and practice; the SI's refusal to dissolve and discuss the next step towards a "higher form of organization"; and the existence of an "occult hierarchy" that necessarily led to a "sub-bolshevik" practice.¹⁸ The group of students associated with the former executive bureau of AFGES expressed their support for the excluded or resigned mem-

¹⁸ "La Vérité est révolutionnaire" [The Truth Is Revolutionary], in *Pour une critique d'avanguardisme. L'unique et sa propriété*, May 1967, Haguenau.

bers: Christine Ballivet, Nasri, Christian Millot, René Geiler, Robert Fischer, Bruno Vayr-Piova, and Schneider himself, who switched sides a few days earlier, alleging that he had been deceived. In a communiqué issued at almost the same time, “You Are Laughing at Us, But Not for Long”, they accused the SI of displaying an unjustifiable contempt towards their theoretical capacities, insofar as they were oriented towards action, as a result of “the SI’s own defects”. Taking the side of the SI in Paris were Joubert, Bertrand and Tony. Long-repressed resentments, grudges and enmities suddenly rose to the surface, unleashing a spate of low blows and turgid analyses that could hardly be understood by outsiders. In a devastating declaration, “Warning! Three Provocateurs” [“Attention! Trois provocateurs”], the SI accused the Alsatian group of having formed “a secret fraction” to “to reinforce democracy and the equal participation of all in the situationist project”, or, should this prove to be impossible, to dissolve the SI. “They were sure that all the situationists are equal, but they found themselves less equal than the others.” Feeling offended at “finding themselves beneath the level of real participation in the SI”, they proposed “to valorize the abstract experience of total, immediate participation”, at the cost of disseminating despicable falsehoods. The exclusion took on a disagreeable, violent tone, with personal attacks and insults: “for the first time ever, a group was identified as a nest of traitors, and given a name that was intended to serve as a synonym for infamy”,¹⁹ Vaneigem would observe much later, although at the time he, too, supported the official version of “a secret fraction [that] was able to form among us” but “was rapidly exposed”.²⁰ The SI’s opponents responded in kind, using the same kind of language and hurling identical accusations.²¹ The existence of a directive situationist nucleus in Paris, and of a subordinate nucleus in Strasbourg that executed the commands issued from Paris, had awakened suspicions in the SI’s new members, which, despite the proclaimed internal democracy, were not brought to light at the time. Furthermore, these suspicions spread to the former executive bureau of AFGES and their friends, and were only exacerbated by Khayati’s cold and distant approach towards them. The students felt uncomfortable with the leading role that their own theoretical shortcomings had granted to the “Paris” SI and felt that they were not being treated with the consideration they deserved as the people who were actually implementing the SI’s tactics. The local *situs* contemplated the scene with their hands tied. On the one hand, there was the lack of autonomy of the group led by Garnault and the Freys; on the other hand, there was Debord’s mistrust of Holl and his scorn for “irresponsible people” who “progressed so laboriously during this small scandal, and en bloc, though they were completely opposed to each other”.²² Faced with such irreconcilable contradictions, Debord, who was not at all prone to yielding to sentimentalism towards just anyone and who was even less accustomed to trusting those whom he considered to be irresponsible, decided to make a clean break, dispensing with the recently acquired sympathizers and publicly chastising the dissenters. He conferred upon them the humiliating sobriquet of “Garnaultins”. This truly Bolshevik procedure was indicative of a scorched earth tactic. The sympathizers who had demonstrated enough merit to be admitted into the SI (Joubert, Bertrand, Schneider) must depart from Strasbourg and leave

¹⁹ *Rien n’est fini, tout commence*.

²⁰ “Avoir pour but la vérité pratique”, *Internationale Situationniste*, No. 11.

²¹ Mario Perniola, *I situazionisti*, Alberto Castelvocchi editore, Roma, 1998. The Spanish edition of this work is unreadable.

²² Letter to André Bertrand and Daniel Joubert, January 22, 1967, in the Daniel Guérin archives of the Library of the University of Nanterre. Vaneigem added the detail that Theo Frey was a teetotaler, which might appear trivial at first sight, but which was of some importance in a group of drinkers.

their impoverishment behind them. But they never did. As for the excluded members, or those who were considered to be excluded, their continued presence in a quiet little provincial city within the well-trodden confines of the university did not favor their plans for advancing to a new stage of being “more extremist than the SI”, an effect aggravated by their sparse endowments with respect to agitation, but which nonetheless drove them to engage in a kind of naive activism—unsuccessfully repeating their old electoral tactics—which was further distorted by an increasingly more abstract mode of thought, which explains why their little excursion on the wild side did not last very long.

The “Garnaultin” affair caused the SI to turn inward, requiring a greater degree of internal control, a demand for more coherence in participating in its activities and for more stringent requirements for relations with other autonomous groups; these initiatives were ineffective and failed to resolve the contradictions generated within the SI by the emergence of multiple opportunities for revolutionary intervention that were not always successfully addressed, and which were often left unexploited. After the dissolution of the International, Debord’s animosity towards his former comrades revealed a will to belittle them, and to erase their presence from his memory. Mustapha Khayati’s protest against the publication of the pamphlet, “On the Poverty of Student Life...”, by Champ Libre in late 1976 provided Debord with an occasion to give free rein to his hostility towards Khayati, and towards Vaneigem, as well, when he even went so far as to cast doubts on Khayati’s authorship of the pamphlet in a text entitled, “Fuck!”, derisively signed, “Some Proletarians”. Debord’s self-aggrandizement and thinly-veiled defeatist attitude rose to the surface in the film, *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, produced in 1978. The ebb of the workers movement, with the concomitant disappearance of any prospect for the universal power of the Workers Councils, contributed to this development. Gianfranco Sanguinetti, the last of Debord’s comrades to feel the sting of his calumny, expressed the opinion, thirty-three years later, that this personality change in Debord that entailed the annihilation of the reality of the other persons who were involved in the situationist adventure, “naturally affected those who had made the greatest contributions to the subversion of which the SI was the standard-bearer. He wanted to stand alone. It would be no exaggeration to say that from that moment on, he engaged in systematic efforts to minimize the role played by all the other members of the group”.²³ Vaneigem jokingly suggested that the key to this enigma might be found in Orson Welles’ film, *Mr. Arkadin*. The plot of that film, so admired by Debord, tells the story of a business magnate who hires a small-time smuggler to uncover the facts concerning his past, which he claims he cannot remember. This improvised private investigator accepts the job, but as he discovers material witnesses to the past of his client, an unknown party kills them, one after another.

Now that the generalized disaster that has followed in the wake of the complete globalization of the economy demands a culture of catastrophe that is equal to the circumstances, the invisible hand of spectacular domination whose purpose is to liquidate the subversive legacy of the situationists is embodied in a whole constellation of prostitute historians, careerist biographers, mercenary academics, cultural cheerleaders and Debordologists of every stripe, all prepared to raise a monument to the glory of the artist in order to all the more effectively distort and erase the example of the revolutionary. In a way, Debord sought out his own self-destruction. The recuperative labors of the pack, involving essentially the sophisticated distortion of the past, are

²³ Letter from Sanguinetti to M. Khayati, December 10, 2012, available on the website of Jules Bonnot de la Bande, julesbonnotdelabande.blogspot.com/.

currently being prosecuted in conjunction with vast efforts of institutionalization and commercialization, but we can at least be sure of the fact that they will only convince those who are easily convinced, that is, fools, and those who were already convinced, that is, knaves.

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Miguel Amorós
Anatomy of a Scandal
February 10, 2018

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