

Guy Debord and the Situationists

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Q. Who were the Situationists?

A. The Situationist International was founded in 1957 and dissolved in 1972. It was a small group of artists and intellectuals, mainly based in Paris. Members had diverse backgrounds and nationalities, but shared a passion for re-activating an old avant-garde dream: merging experimental art, revolutionary politics and everyday life. Their most recent antecedents in France were the Surrealists. The Surrealist movement had been launched in 1924 with the publication of André Breton's first manifesto, and continued to exist until 1969. Thus, the Surrealist and Situationist movements were contemporaneous for the latter part of the 1950s and much of the 1960s. However, the Situationists assumed that Surrealism after the Second World War no longer had an influential role to play in the contemporary avant-garde. The challenge for the Situationists, then, was to update Surrealism and to avoid the latter's institutionalization as museum artefacts or university set texts.

Q. What were Debord's key ideas and how did they provide a systematic critique of French society in the 1960s?

A. Debord's book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, was published in Paris in 1967 and is the most important formulation of Situationist ideas. Debord was writing within, and about, a period which the historian Eric Hobsbawm has characterized as 'The Golden Age' -- mainly the 1950s and the 1960s when the general populations of North America and Western Europe, at least, experienced more than the basic necessities for the first time in human history. War and upheaval seemed to be over, to be replaced by the pleasures of advanced consumption. Advertising offered the public assurances that the best was yet to come, but Debord was not convinced. The possession of a television or washing machine (both introduced to France in the mid-1950s) did not end exploitation or lack of political power in the neighbourhood and the workplace. Rather, the commodity economy identified by Marx a century before had merely expanded. For Debord, the spectacle was nothing less than the dictatorship of the commodity.

Q. What was Debord's attitude towards the mainstream French Left, in particular, the PCF?

A. The mainstream French Left was condemned for not supporting a number of contemporary challenges. According to Debord, the Left should have offered an imaginative response to the prosperity of the 1950s and the 1960s; unequivocal support for colonial liberation, especially in Algeria; and the principled rejection of the new authoritarianism masquerading as Chinese or Soviet Communism. The

French Communist Party, in particular, was dismissed as a reactionary force, a servile apologist for the Soviet Union and ultra-cautious in its analyses of French affairs at home and abroad.

Q. What impact did the Situationists have on May 1968?

A. This is debatable. Debord and others were certainly involved in the events, though it is difficult to assess how influential they (or any other group) were in the largest strike and mass movement ever in French history. An interesting suggestion recently made by author Kristin Ross is that the Situationist influence was primarily *after* the events as people sought to make sense of what had happened.

Q. What has been the legacy of the Situationists?

A. Guy Debord and the Situationist International continue to have a posthumous influence, in France and elsewhere. Basic terms from the Situationist lexicon such as *la dérive* (urban drift), *le détournement* (corruption or diversion) and *La Société du Spectacle* (The Society of the Spectacle) have become accepted terms in contemporary French and the Situationist influence is evident in diverse areas of contemporary life, including academia (especially cultural studies and social geography), architecture and urbanism, art (fine and graphic), literature and political activism.

Key publication by David Evans

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Further reading

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Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001).

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Tom McDonough (ed.), *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).