

Relevance in Obsolescence: Recuperation and Temporality in the Work of Guy Debord and the Situationist International

Recuperation

In 2009, the French State bought an archive of Guy Debord's work, containing his manuscripts, correspondence, reading notes, cinematic material and assorted personal effects. This purchase, which was conducted in order to prevent the archive's sale to Yale, resulted in its installation in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF). In order for this to take place, the President of the Bibliothèque was required to dub Debord's work a 'national treasure'; Sarkozy's minister of culture was then obliged to endorse that evaluation by describing Debord as a 'great French intellectual'.¹ Unsurprisingly, these statements have proved somewhat notorious. Debord's 'bad reputation'² once merited far more attention from the police and secret services than it did from academia, and the irony involved in the archive's acquisition has not been lost on its many commentators: for as a journalist in *Le Monde* remarked, it entailed housing, 'in a temple of the state', the archives of 'an intellectual who was critical of all institutions, and of society in general'.³ Yet whilst the tension between the archive's content and its current location may have been sufficient to provoke commentary in the press, it remains the case that Debord's work, together with that of the Situationist International (S.I.), has been steadily accepted and celebrated by the society that it opposed for years.

This process of accommodation has proceeded apace over the past few decades, and Situationist material has now become a fixture of both the academic Left and of university teaching programmes; this despite the fact that in 1966, a French judge felt moved to declare Situationist ideas to be a genuine 'threat' to the minds of impressionable students, and to society at large.⁴ Thus whilst the transition from the status of 'threat' to that of 'treasure' announced by the archive's purchase is sharp, it is by no means without precedent. In this regard, it has been seen by many as an example of 'recuperation':⁵ a term that was used by the S.I. themselves to denote the process through which radical material came to be neutralised through its absorption into the culture that it had once challenged; to identify forms of imposed collaboration with the cultural powers that such material had initially opposed.

Such objections have a long history. Those concerned with defending Debord and the S.I.'s work have often claimed that the latter has been slowly reduced to the level of the very same 'spectacle' that it had once described and opposed: after all, one can now buy Situationist t-shirts and mobile phone applications, to say nothing of the references to this material that pepper the contemporary discourses of art, popular culture and the press. Recuperation is, however, not only a familiar concept, but also

¹ Gallix 2009

² Debord 2001a

³ Rérolle 2013

⁴ Quoted in Dark Star 2001, p.9

⁵ See for example Zagdanski 2013; see Jappe in Antonucci 2013 for a different perspective.

an inherently problematic one; or at least it certainly can be. Its typical formulations assume the validity of that which they would defend (e.g. to describe Debord's theory of spectacle as having become spectacular presupposes the accuracy of that theory), and are thus of little use within the context of a critical engagement with this material. Furthermore, it also invites an inherently protective and defensive posture towards the latter, which lends itself to the further fetishisation of Debord and the S.I.'s work, and therefore jars with their trenchant antipathy to such veneration.⁶ It is, however, possible to derive a rather more useful, and indeed rather less faithfully purist notion of recuperation from this material.

Doing so entails addressing the notions of temporality that inflect and support many of Debord and the S.I.'s claims. For like so much of their work, the concept of recuperation does not rest upon a naïve, fixed and essentialist notion of authenticity, as is often assumed, but is instead premised upon a concern with history. Recuperation should be understood not as the corruption of a pure object, but rather as an aspect of the separation from historical time that Debord and the S.I. opposed. Addressing the concept in this regard thus provides an opportunity to highlight the importance and centrality of the themes of temporality and history within Debord's theoretical claims. Furthermore, it can also serve to introduce their implications, as regards the potential pertinence, *vis a vis* the contemporary reception of this material, of the conception of historical praxis upon which so much of it rests. Once this is identified, one can gain a clearer sense of the manner in which Debord and the S.I.'s work actively invited its own critical supersession.

Contextual specificity

In a letter of 1966, Debord explained to a correspondent that the S.I.'s relative obscurity at that time was due to two factors: on the one hand, to the absence of 'visible [revolutionary] currents in modern society' that sought the 'global critique' offered by the S.I.'s analyses, and which would thus adopt and forcibly impose the critique that the group had provided; and on the other, to the S.I.'s steadfast (albeit by no means entirely naïve)⁷ refusal of the more quiescent visibility proffered by the temptation of allowing the 'cultural recuperation'⁸ of their ideas. Evidently, the group's contemporary fame and prominence owes relatively little to the presence of such 'currents' within our own, present society, and rather more to the eventual victory of that latter, more problematic mode of visibility. The relevance of Debord's claim here, however, is that it reflects his own and the S.I.'s pursuit of a condition of unity between theory and the forces that would employ it, and their consequent opposition to the reduction of such theory to an empty palliative for such praxis. Both dynamics stem from Debord's central concept of 'spectacle', which can be quickly schematised here as the fetishistic transposition of collective agency and capacity onto separated, independent bodies of power (e.g. the economy, the Party, religion,

⁶ 'Mythological recognition' from 'feeble admirers' (Debord 2003a, p.281) and 'pro-Situs' was consistently rejected, and often in the harshest terms. See S.I. 2003 for extended comments on the 'pro-Situ' phenomenon.

⁷ Debord and the S.I. were well aware that any such fame was to some degree inevitable, and that it could perhaps be used, albeit carefully, to good effect. In 1968, Debord wrote the following: 'We cannot prevent the vogue that the term "Situationist" has achieved here and there. We must ensure that this (normal) phenomenon serves us more than it harms us. That which "serves us", in my view, is indistinguishable from that which serves to unify and radicalize scattered struggles' (Debord 2003a, p.279).

⁸ Debord 2003a, p.180

hierarchy, etc.; or in this case, detached and neutered depictions of insurrectionary potential). These views should therefore be seen to inform Debord's prescient prediction in 1967 that if his work were to become divorced from the 'practical movement of negation within society', which it sought to facilitate and clarify, it would, in consequence, become 'just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric' that served only to 'buttress the spectacular system itself'.⁹ It would, in other words, become just another means of merely describing, and thus *representing* that society's historical negation, as opposed to functioning as an element of a practical movement engaged in the latter.

This then gives rise to the following implications. Firstly, it would seem that if one were to address the contemporary uses, abuses and appropriations of Debord and the S.I.'s work via a concept of recuperation, as many have done in the past, then it would not be enough to simply advocate identifying its putatively radical elements, with a view towards extracting them from beneath the piles of t-shirts, conferences and coffee-table books that have piled up upon them. If any such material were treated as a mere item within the museum of radical ideas, the result – if we were to address this material on its own terms – would still fall short of the condition of praxis that it both prescribed and sought to foster. Yet nor would it be enough to advocate, on the basis of that observation, some kind of headlong rush towards applying it in 'practice' today. For if theory is indeed to form a component of a mode of historical praxis – or, to use Debord's terms above, if it is to clarify and foster a 'practical movement of negation' within a given socio-historical moment – then it must, in consequence, be specific to the milieu and context within which it sought to intervene. Such theory, like the thought proper to strategy and tactics, amounts to an attempt to conceive and conduct a practical intervention within a specific moment: an intervention, in other words, within the broader, processual 'war' of the on-going mode of praxis that Debord and the S.I. identified with both communism and the path taken towards it. Therefore, just as no general would use the same plans in each and every engagement, regardless of changes in the forces and terrain involved, so too does it seem problematic to impose a fifty-year old body of theory onto our own current circumstances; particularly given the fact that the theory in question places tremendous emphasis on the need for change, intervention, and the contextual specificity of 'historical thought'. If addressed with these themes in mind, Debord and the S.I.'s work can be seen to clearly invite its own future supersession *qua* its function as a finite moment of intervention (e.g. Debord's statement in 1968 that 'we have never considered the S.I. to be a goal in itself,' but rather 'a moment of historical activity';¹⁰ or as he put it in 1969, whilst reflecting on the events of the previous May: 'From now on we are sure of a satisfactory consummation of our activities: the S.I. will be superseded').¹¹ To place this in relation to the example with which we began: although the BNF's purchase of the archive is by no means without paradox and tension, it seems productive to actually use its content as a resource towards a critical and contextual evaluation of Debord and the S.I.'s work. And rather than advocating the continued applicability of the group's analyses, focus should presumably fall upon the manner in which they invited their own critical assessment and supersession.

Debord in particular placed great stress on the importance of the judgment of history *vis a vis* the evaluation of the efficacy and validity of bodies of radical theory. When addressing his own, one might therefore point to the fact that the S.I.'s

⁹ Debord 1995, p.143; 2006a, p.852

¹⁰ Debord 2003a, p.280

¹¹ S.I. 2006, p.325; 1997, p.34; Debord 2006a, p.963

promised revolution ultimately failed to transpire. One could also ask whether the transition of Debord's work from the status of 'threat' to that of a 'treasure' reflects theoretical failings within it; whether there are issues or theoretical problems within it that render it susceptible to the diminution of its radicalism, and which may have thus eased its current endorsement and reduction to the level of 'just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric'. Furthermore: if the ostensible 'threat' that it once posed stemmed from its purported connection to a radical milieu that has now receded into our own past, an enquiry into whatever oppositional elements may still reside within it should presumably address the conceptual mechanics that inform its underlying concern with praxis. This is because the latter implies further engagements and interventions, beyond those developed by Debord and the S.I. themselves.

These observations amount to the following contentions: a) there may indeed be flaws within this material that undermine, or can be seen in retrospect to have undermined its critical efficacy; but nonetheless, b) the conceptions of temporality and praxis that support it may remain of interest, not least because they seem to point beyond Debord and the S.I.'s extant formulations, and towards the generation of new, more contemporary theoretical positions.

The remainder of this text will present some initial indications in support of those contentions, whilst also attempting to develop the notion of praxis that the latter proposition entails. We will begin with a few general comments on the development and aims of Debord and the S.I.'s work; having done so, we will then look at the nature and limitations of Debord's theoretical claims. Yet having indicated some of the problems that can be found within that body of theory, we will move on to consider Debord's views on time and history in a little more detail. This can afford a degree of insight into the connections between his interpretation of Hegelian Marxism and his interest in strategy, and can thereby highlight the notion of praxis that inheres within this material. We will conclude by returning to the bearing that these views on temporality and agency may have upon the contemporary status and reception of Debord and the S.I.'s work.

The realisation of philosophy

The S.I. officially began life in 1957, and arose from the amalgamation of several avant-garde groups concerned with the separation and detachment of art and culture from everyday life. Their initial programme, as expressed in Debord's seminal 'Report on the Construction of Situations', was to apply art's creativity and imagination within everyday life itself, through using the techniques developed within architecture and the arts as means of shaping and constructing lived experience. As the group's theoretical work developed, this ambition came to be increasingly inflected with Young Hegelian themes pertaining to the supersession of the human subject's detachment from his or her own alienated powers, capacities and activity. Marx's early concern with 'realizing [*verwirklichen*]'¹² philosophy in lived praxis became central to this, as the static, passive detachment that Marx had attributed to philosophy was seen to echo that of art's detachment from life (hence the S.I.'s contention that: 'Just as in the first half of the nineteenth century revolutionary theory arose out of philosophy ... so now it is going to rise once again out of modern art and poetry').¹³ Where philosophy had contemplated life, attempting to define its on-going,

¹² Marx, 1975, p.250

¹³ S.I. 2006, p.139; 1997, p.307

fluid movement by way of stable and effectively static truths, art had depicted it, producing similarly static images thereof. Both were thus marked by the distinction between known object and knowing subject, insofar as the actual movement of lived practice constituted an object of enquiry that could only be figured through conceptual or artistic portrayals of that movement: through representations that remained detached from the latter, but which nonetheless purported to express its true nature, beauty and potential.

In rectifying this separation, the realisation of art in lived praxis would augment the historical agency to which Marx's early critique of Hegel had given initial theoretical expression, thereby allowing that agency to flourish. For whilst Marx had inaugurated a conception of genuinely self-determinate praxis, within which human thought would take an active role in changing the world rather than reflecting upon the latter's ostensibly automatic transformation (as described by Hegel's idealism), the Situationists would grant this agency a greater capacity for self-determination. The communist project could not, therefore, be a drive towards more equitable forms of labour: instead, and insofar as the Situationist revolution would actualise the capacities and possibilities afforded by modern society's technical abilities, that agency would now tend towards the abolition of work *per se*, as the provision of primary material needs through automation would allow it to shape itself as fully and creatively as possible according to its own subjective desires. Thus the more utopian¹⁴ aspects of the S.I.'s goals were not simply a romantic gloss upon an essentially traditional communist project, but rather a marker of their opposition to 'actually existing socialism'. For example: Lukács, discussing the dictatorship of the proletariat, once warned that 'Freedom cannot represent a value in itself,' and that it must '*serve the rule of the proletariat, not the other way round*';¹⁵ the S.I., reversing the Surrealists' own famous assertion that poetry must be put at the service of revolution, claimed that 'the point' was in fact 'to put revolution at the service of poetry', as doing so would ensure that 'the revolution does not betray its own project'.¹⁶ The unification of subject and object would not therefore be embodied in a bureaucratic party (as with Lukács), but would rather take the form of human subjects shaping themselves and their world according to their own wishes.

Spectacle

This then brings us to Debord's theory of spectacle, which essentially describes the deprivation of such a condition of engagement in historical time. His mature theoretical work addresses the separation of acting subjects from their own capacities and actions, understood in terms of their detachment from their capacity to shape and direct their own histories. This is based upon an essentially Young Hegelian concern with alienated, detached bodies of collective power – Bakunin, Cieszkowski, Feuerbach and Stirner are all key figures for Debord – albeit one that was no less deeply inflected by Marx's early emphasis on the derivation of all such forms of

¹⁴ The S.I.'s optimism should not be underestimated. In 1959 Debord claimed that the use of 'one-man helicopters' would 'have spread to the general public within twenty years' (S.I. 2006, p.70; 1997, p.104); also in 1959, Constant declared that 'space travel, which seems likely in the near future' would further the development of Situationist architecture, 'since establishing bases on other planets will immediately raise the problem of sheltered cities, which may provide models for our study of future urbanism' (S.I. 2006, p.72; 1997, p.107).

¹⁵ Lukács 1971, p.292

¹⁶ S.I. 2006, p.151; 1997, p.327

separated power from a fragmented and contradictory organisation of socio-economic activity. The central contention of Debord's conception of spectacle, therefore, is that social atomisation tends towards the generation of bodies of power that become detached from, and indeed come to govern and dominate, the individuals concerned: a problematic that had been brought to an extreme by modern capitalism, which is itself composed of social relations that are characterised by individualisation, and which give rise to society's total subordination to its own economy.

The Society of the Spectacle (1967) thus presents an analysis of contemporary capitalism. The spectacle, he writes, 'corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonisation of social life'.¹⁷ However, that 'moment' was seen to have arisen from a long process of historical development, through which the problematic of separation described above steadily deepened.¹⁸ In addition, Debord's attempt to describe society as a totality, unified under the governing, defining rubric of spectacle, entailed gathering together a host of different phenomena: ideology, dogma, religion, commodities, the Party, etc., were all cast as spectacular in this sense, insofar as all entailed concentrated forms of separated power. Ultimately, the entirety of lived social activity was held to have become dominated and shaped by the alienated social power and estranged activity that comprises capitalist value, which had come to regulate and order a world within which human subjects had become reduced to the status of passive, contemplative objects: to mere 'spectators' of a history and social existence that had come to be shaped by a sovereign economy, rather than by their own collective and conscious designs.

This theory is, however, not without problems. Debord's mature account of spectacle – i.e. that advanced in 1967's *The Society of the Spectacle* – casts all social practice within modern capitalist societies as having become effectively equivalent with all others, insofar as all elements of social life had come to be similarly shaped by capital's dictates, and thus similarly alienated from the individuals that conduct them. Yet although the theory draws heavily on the Marx of *Capital* in order to formulate these claims, and although it emphasises alienation and social fragmentation, it tends at times towards effacing the latter's presentation of capital as an antagonistic set of social relations based around the fulcrum of class opposition in the wage-relation. The concept of spectacle lends itself to a dichotomy between an alienated consciousness on the one hand, and a homogenised world on the other: production, circulation, work, leisure, etc., are posed as equivalent elements of the world faced by that consciousness. On the one hand, this serves to emphasise the sheer scale of modern capitalism's domination of human reality; some have thus praised the S.I.'s focus on the everyday rather than on the classical wage-relation as a virtue, not least as it can seem to afford a route beyond a traditionally conceived class struggle.¹⁹ Furthermore, its total condemnation of modern society implies a radical, revolutionary break with the entirety of its mode of social existence. Yet the homogeneity and implicit dichotomy noted above, which derive from the primacy that the concept of spectacle accords to a detached, contemplative subjective consciousness, entail that little purchase is offered on the means by which any such revolutionary break might be made. At its weakest points, this is a perspective that reduces to an abstract opposition between the 'directly lived'²⁰ 'life' that Debord and

¹⁷ Debord 1995, p.29; 2006a, p.778

¹⁸ Debord 2004, p.456

¹⁹ See for example Endnotes 2008 and 2010.

²⁰ Debord 1995, p.12; 2006a, p.766

the S.I. sought to foster, versus the ‘non-life’²¹ of spectacle. His theory can thus seem rather more oriented towards capital’s subjective effects than towards its concrete causes. This then brings us to contention outlined earlier, concerning the potential interest and implications of the theory of praxis that can be discerned within this material.

Time and history

Debord’s work is greatly inflected by an essentially existential problematic concerning the importance of self-determinacy. Underlying all of his theses about capitalism and its culture, and indeed defining the very principle of spectacle itself, is a concern with the revolutionary re-appropriation of the ability to self-consciously direct the moments of experience that compose and delimit subjective existence. This basic premise was cast as the defining concept for an entire historical totality: capitalism’s development was held to have rendered humanity’s power to consciously shape its world greater than at any other time in the past; yet at the same time, the complete subordination of lived activity to its dictates had caused that power to become further removed from its producers than ever before. As indicated above, modern society was thus presented as having engendered a demand for a ‘higher’, more radical form of communism than that of the purely economic struggles of the past. This contradiction, and the defining problematic of spectatorship that it entailed, was viewed as giving rise to an immanent, potentially society-wide radicalism, driven towards the supersession of *all* instances of the alienation of collective agency and power. Struggles against the modern spectacle would thus make clearly and self-consciously explicit the purportedly implicit drive towards radical self-determinacy that Debord held to have inhered within all prior instances of insurrection (for example: the ‘evolution of class society into the spectacular organisation of non-life ... obliges the revolutionary project to become *visibly* what it always was *essentially*’).²² This demand for free self-determinacy, *qua* the reclamation of a power to shape the world, essentially amounts to a drive towards the reclamation of history itself: not simply in terms of appropriating a culture’s memory of its own past, but rather as the potential to shape the future.

Debord’s key concerns with time, temporality and history run throughout his oeuvre, and informed the inclusion of no less than two chapters on time in *The Society of the Spectacle*. These chapters are rarely discussed – perhaps as they have little obvious place within the popular media-centric interpretations of Debord’s work, which tend to cast it as a simple critique of the mass media – but they are nonetheless important; for as Debord indicates in his correspondence, they serve to present ‘historical time’ as the ‘milieu and goal of the proletarian revolution’.²³ Debord is no Kantian: time, in his view, exists independently of humanity. History, however, as the form taken by the human consciousness of time’s passage, emerges only with the advent of human beings.²⁴ The ‘historical time’ referred to in the quotation above is thus a consciously experienced progression of events within time, and in Debord’s fullest uses of the phrase²⁵ it denotes the pro-active, self-conscious and self-

²¹ Debord 1995, p.12; 2006a, p.766

²² Debord 1995, pp.89-90; 2006a, p.819; italics in the original.

²³ Debord 2004, p.79

²⁴ Debord 1995, p.92; 2006a, p.820.

²⁵ ‘In the demand to *live* the historical time that it creates, the proletariat discovers the single, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project’ (Debord 1995, p.106, translation altered; 2006a,

determinate direction of such experience. His presentation of such a time as the ‘milieu and goal’ of revolution thus reflects the sense in which the communism that he and the S.I. sought and advocated, at least during their more Hegelian and Marxian period in the 1960s, is best understood as a condition of collective historical praxis. It was, in other words, to be an on-going process, in which a form of unity with time would be established by virtue of the self-determinate quality of actions undertaken within it. The supersession of spectacular separation from the power to shape and affect history would thus afford an ‘end of pre-history’,²⁶ insofar as lived historical time would cease to be driven and directed by alienated economic power, but would instead become a conscious, collective project.

Debord in fact states in *The Society of the Spectacle* that the human subject is ‘one [*identique*] with time’,²⁷ because time, in his view, is ‘the medium in which the subject realises himself in losing himself, becoming other in order to become truly himself [*pour devenir la vérité de lui-même*]’.²⁸ The S.I.’s constructed situations were to afford, or would at least pre-figure the unity with time that these positions entailed; hence the sense in which the realisation of art would entail the creation of transitory moments of life rather than permanent objects (‘The point’, Debord once wrote, ‘is to produce ourselves rather than things that enslave us’).²⁹ For the same reasons, the success of constructed situations could ‘reside only in their fleeting effect [*leur effet passager*]’.³⁰ They were to be ‘without a future’, and would exist only as ‘passageways [*lieux de passage*]’; for ‘we care nothing,’ Debord claimed, ‘about the permanence of art or of anything else.’³¹ It might also be noted that this openness to time informed the aspects of play associated with Situationist activity. Insofar as the movement of time entailed the advent of contingencies and unforeseen eventualities, the experience thereof would involve a ludic dimension, which Debord and the S.I. sought to foster. Hence Debord’s claim that the ‘Situationist attitude’ consisted of ‘gambling on the flow [*fuite*] of time’.³² Furthermore, this openness to contingency also informed his interest in strategy.

Strategy and praxis

It’s often noted that the history of the S.I. can be split into two distinct periods: their early, formative years, in which their claims and positions were more influenced by their avant-garde origins; and a second period, dating from the early 1960s onwards, in which they became increasingly concerned with the development of revolutionary social theory. Some commentators have adopted something rather similar as regards Debord himself. Noting the distinction in tone between 1967’s *The Society of the Spectacle* and his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* of 1988, some have distinguished the icy utopianism of the former from an ostensibly more melancholic and defeatist later period. There is in fact no such defeatism in Debord’s later work; only an appraisal of the complexities and confusions of conducting large-scale radical politics within the context of modern society. It’s thus rather more productive to view

p.829).

²⁶ Debord 2004, p.54

²⁷ Debord 1995, p.92; 2006a, p.820

²⁸ Debord 1995, p.115-6, translation altered; 2006a, p.835

²⁹ S.I. 2006, p.53; 1997, p.21

³⁰ S.I. 2006, p.53; 1997, p.20

³¹ S.I. 2006, p.41; Debord 2006a, p.326, translation altered

³² S.I. 2006, p.42; Debord 2006a, p.327

this later period as being characterised not by a turn towards the melancholic, but rather towards the strategic. Around the mid-1970s – and thus after the S.I.'s auto-dissolution in 1972 – Debord's long-standing interest in this topic seems to have taken on a more pronounced role. For example, he writes in a letter of 1974 that:

The principle work that, it appears to me, has to be engaged in now – as the complementary contrary to *The Society of the Spectacle*, which described frozen alienation (and the negation that is implicit within it) – is *the theory of historical action*. It [the task] is to advance, in its moment, which has come, *strategic theory*. At this stage, and to speak schematically here, the basic theoreticians to retrieve and develop are no longer Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont, but Thucydides – Machiavelli – Clausewitz.³³

This 'theory of historical action' constitutes an extension of the Hegelian Marxism that Debord developed in the 1960s; a claim that can perhaps be illustrated here with an anecdote. Giorgio Agamben, who had the rare honour of being one of the few modern intellectuals whom Debord did not despise, recalls in an essay that he once told Debord that he considered him to be a philosopher. Debord responded by saying 'I'm not a philosopher, I'm a strategist.'³⁴ Agamben does not make this point, and admittedly, nor does Debord, or at least not explicitly within his published works – like almost all of the positions set out here, it has to be inferred and reconstructed from the scattered evidence that he provides us – but his response to that question was no doubt due to his view that strategy is the form to be taken by philosophy when it comes to be actualized, following Marx's critique of Hegel, in historical praxis. This informs his enigmatic references to 'dialectical, strategic thought'³⁵ in his correspondence, and indeed his contention, made in the personal notes that are now stored in the BNF's archive, that 'to think dialectically and to think strategically' is 'the same thing'.³⁶ Strategy and dialectics are the 'same thing', because thought engaged in praxis must function as a means of engaging with shifting, conflicting and developing circumstances. The content of that archive can in fact serve as a further illustration of these points. When reading – and Debord clearly read an extraordinary amount – he would write, in tiny, meticulous handwriting, quotations, notes and ideas on small cards and pieces of paper. He built up an enormous collection of these *fiches lectures* throughout his life, all of which are now carefully catalogued and stored in boxes, folders and sub-folders in the BNF. It seems significant that although there is an entire box of material on Hegel, and a slightly larger box on Marx and Marxism, both are dwarfed by two whole boxes of notes on strategy and military history. Strategy was evidently the major concern; but then that is because Debord's conception thereof was in fact an iteration of his Hegelian Marxism. In effect, his work advocates the practical, Marxian actualisation of French Hegelianism's characteristic focus on Hegel's links between consciousness, negativity and temporality. The result is a means of thinking history *qua* self-conscious self-creation.

Once the link between Debord's strategic concerns and his views on Hegel, Marx and praxis is made, Debord's oeuvre can then be seen to contain not only a critical theory of contemporary capitalism, but also a theory of political praxis geared towards the negotiation and contestation of the latter. Debord and the S.I.'s work could then serve as the starting pointy for a theory of political agency.

There is in fact a sense in which Debord's views on time and history imply

³³ Debord 2005, p.127

³⁴ Agamben 2004, p.313

³⁵ Debord 2008, p.78

³⁶ Debord NAF28603, Notes de Lecture, Stratégie, Histoire Militaire 4

that very project. In his 1978 film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, and whilst rejecting the notion that he would construct theoretical systems as if they were timeless, static philosophies, Debord stated that theories are in fact ‘only made to die in the war of time’: for like ‘military units’, they ‘must be sent into battle at the right moment’, and have to be continually ‘replaced, because they are constantly being worn out, by their decisive victories even more than by their partial defeats’.³⁷ Like works of military strategy, theories are attempts to clarify a given moment: their task is to afford an understanding of a political and economic landscape and to provide insight into the forces ranged upon it, so as to further the work of those that would hasten its demise. Clearly, any such theory can only be properly valid within the context that it seeks to articulate. It cannot therefore be arbitrarily imposed upon other situations. For the same reasons, a theory’s validity would be undermined if its success and validity turned it into a discrete object that could be considered and discussed in abstraction from the praxis to which it pertained (hence Debord’s prediction, noted earlier, that his theory could become ‘just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric’).³⁸ The theory of spectacle is of course only one such theory, and Debord situates it within a historical succession of differing, contextual views on the problems and politics of differing circumstances. Thus the ideas that support it – i.e. these notions of time and history, and their attendant demand for thought’s continual engagement in the latter – actively point beyond it.

Granted, Debord seems to have felt very secure in the lasting validity of his own theory. In 1979, and in his preface to the fourth Italian edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, he claimed that he had ‘no doubt’ that the book’s theses would remain valid ‘until the end of the century and even beyond’.³⁹ This confidence does not however entirely contradict these views on history and agency, but rather compliments them, as it was based on the contention that his theory had not simply depicted a historical moment as a discrete, static, object of enquiry, but had instead given voice to that moment’s own immanent negation. Quoting one of Marx’s most famous comments on the Hegelian dialectic,⁴⁰ he claimed that he had ‘understood the constitutive factors of the spectacle “in motion, and consequently by their transient aspect as well”, that is to say, by envisaging the whole of the historical movement that has been able to edify this order, and which is now beginning to dissolve it’.⁴¹ His theoretical work is thus not simply subject to time and history, insofar as it is a particular theory within time: it is rather subject to them insofar as it wants to be one with their movement. It is an attempt, in other words, to form part of ‘*l’intelligence*’ (to quote a rather apposite French translation of that same passage from Marx) of the ‘*négation fatale*’ and ‘*destruction nécessaire*’ of all positive, existing forms.⁴²

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³⁷ Debord 2003b, pp.150-1, translation altered; 2006a, p.1354

³⁸ Debord 1995, p.143; 2006b, p.852

³⁹ Debord 1979; 2006a, p.1465

⁴⁰ See Debord’s letter to Paolo Salvadori of the 7th February 1979, which indicates the postface to the second German edition of *Capital* to be the source of this quotation (Debord 2006b, p.19; see Marx 1976, p.103 for the original passage). I have altered Debord’s quotation very slightly, so as to make it fit a little more easily with Ben Fowkes’ English translation of Marx’s words. Debord’s phrase does in fact depart slightly from the French translation of Marx’s lines. Given that he also refers to Marx’s postface in that letter as a ‘preface’, he may, perhaps, have been quoting from memory.

⁴¹ Debord 1979, translation altered; 2006a, p.1465

⁴² Marx 1873

Clearly, the issues highlighted above sit rather uncomfortably alongside some of the contemporary tendencies towards treating this material as a discrete body of work that can be readily imposed upon our present. The latter view is much less evident within the currents of Marxian thought that address Debord and the S.I.'s work, as they tend to treat it more as a landmark within the history of radical ideas: as a corpus that prefigures elements of *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and *Wertkritik*, and which can be framed, albeit rather less convincingly, as a boundary marker for the historical purview of the classical workers' movement.⁴³ However, within the broader realms of critical and continental theory – and indeed within much of the extant commentary on his own and the S.I.'s work – Debord's theory often tends to be presented either as a defining synthesis of our modern ills, or as a remarkably prescient description of their inherent dynamic.⁴⁴ Agamben, referred to above, claimed that Debord possessed a 'prophetic clairvoyance',⁴⁵ insofar as that 'the contemporary phase of capitalism' is without doubt 'the society of the spectacle';⁴⁶ likewise, Hardt and Negri have described *The Society of the Spectacle* as 'perhaps the best articulation, in its own delirious way, of the contemporary consciousness of the triumph of capital'.⁴⁷ Other writers have echoed each other in claiming that that book is now 'more relevant than ever as a diagnostic tool in political analysis',⁴⁸ that it possesses more 'explanatory power ... than ever',⁴⁹ and that 'never before' has it seemed 'quite as relevant as it does now'.⁵⁰ Such contentions sit rather awkwardly with the essentially strategic, and thus historically and contextually situated role that this body of theoretical work was originally intended to perform. For if theory is to function as strategy, then it must be specific to the struggles and moments that it would articulate and traverse. If it is not superseded in tandem with changing circumstances – i.e. if it remains in place beyond its period of relevance and efficacy, perhaps due to its success or celebrity – then theory becomes dogma, and praxis gives way to spectacle. Therefore if a work such as *The Society of the Spectacle* is to be relevant today, in a manner that accords with its author's original intentions – as opposed to those of its contemporary appropriators – then its pertinence must be found in its relative obsolescence; and whilst the supersession that this entails must obviously be practical as well as theoretical, Contributions might be drawn from addressing Debord and the S.I.'s work on its own terms, by way of a consideration of the ideas that underlie, inform, and seemingly point beyond it.

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⁴³ 'The relevance of Debord's thought lies in his having been the first to interpret the present situation in the light of the Marxian theory of value, whereas his shakier contentions are made at points where his thinking is still under the influence of the Marxism of the workers' movement' (Jappe 1999, p.18); see also the more recent critical remarks made by the Endnotes group (Endnotes 2010 and 2012), which draw on claims made by Gilles Dauvé (e.g. Dauvé 2000) and *Théorie Communiste*.

⁴⁴ See for example Beller 2006, Gilman-Opalsky 2011 and Jappe 1999, to name but a few.

⁴⁵ Agamben 2000, p.73

⁴⁶ Agamben 2000, p.11

⁴⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p.427

⁴⁸ Critchley 2012, p.135

⁴⁹ Retort, 2006, p.17

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