Marxism, Anarchism and the Situationists’ Theory of Revolution

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Abstract
In recent protest movements, such as those against ‘globalization’, Situationist ideas and practices – which were developed in the late 1950s to the early 1970s – have inspired some of those radicals involved in such dissent. Given this revived interest in the Situationist International, this article takes the opportunity to examine the Situationists’ theory of revolution in relation to both Marxism and anarchism. It argues that while the Situationists’ theory of revolution, in respect of some of its key characteristics, corresponds to Bakunin’s vision of a revolutionary upheaval, the intellectual ancestry of the Situationists’ theory can be traced, chiefly, to the thought of Marx and the ideas of several Marxist thinkers, as well as to the ideas of pre-Situationist avant-garde ‘artists’.

Keywords
Situationist International, Debord, Vaneigem, revolution, workers’ councils, Bakunin, Marx, class

Introduction
In recent protest movements, such as those against ‘globalization’, Situationist ideas and practices – which were developed in the late 1950s to the early 1970s – have inspired some of those radicals involved in such dissent. Given this revived interest in the Situationist International (SI), I shall, in this article, take the opportunity to examine the Situationists’ theory of revolution in relation to both Marxism and anarchism.

The SI existed from 1957 to 1972. Based in Paris, the group was formed by various individuals who had been associated with European avant-garde artistic organizations. The Situationists initially engaged in culturally subversive activities, undertaking, for instance, experimental walks through the city utilizing a technique they termed the dérive. In the early 1960s the group developed a more ‘political’ focus in a quest to actualize their vision of a ‘transcendence of art’ (Debord, 1967 [1967]: para 191). The SI’s two major theorists were Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. A few months after Debord’s (1967) La société du spectacle (translated as The Society of the...
In January of 1968 a radical student group – galvanized by Situationist ideas – known as the Enragés, began their ‘strategy [of] provocation’ (Seale and McConville, 1968: 32) at the University of Nanterre on the outskirts of Paris. By early May student demonstrations held near the Sorbonne led to rioting and the construction of barricades in the Latin Quarter (Ford, 2005: 117–120; Reader, 1993: 10–11; Seale and McConville, 1968: chapter 4). On 13 May a general strike commenced, ‘involving nine million workers’ (Reader, 1993: 1, 12); this disruption to the ‘normal’ functioning of capitalist society ‘was prolonged by a series of wildcat strikes and occupations’ (Plant, 1992: 97). The SI were active participants in the occupation of the Sorbonne and Situationist slogans – as well as slogans which ‘had a situationist air about them’ – appeared ‘on the walls [of France] and often on treasured statues and works of art’ (Plant, 1992: 102–103). The Situationists characterized this large-scale popular uprising as ‘a festival, a game, a real presence of people and of time’ (Knabb, 2006: 289). In the words of the SI member René Viénet: ‘Capitalized time stopped. Without any trains, métro, cars, or work the strikers recaptured the time so sadly lost in factories, on motorways, in front of the TV. People strolled, dreamed, learned how to live. Desires began to become, little by little, reality’ (Viénet, 1992 [1968]: 77).

The Situationists argued that capitalist society had, by the 1920s, become a ‘spectacle’ (Debord, 1990 [1988]: 3). A new phase of capitalist development had begun, one which required ‘wage-earners to apply their freedom of choice to the vast range of new commodities now on offer’ (Debord, 1990 [1988]: 8); ‘alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses’ (Debord, 1995 [1967]: para 42). For the Situationists, the spectacle is an image saturated society in which the commodity-form dominates ‘lived experience’ (Knabb, 2006: 167–168) whether as ‘news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment’ (Debord, 1995 [1967]: para 6). In such a society ‘[a]ll that was once directly lived has become mere representation’ (Debord, 1995 [1967]: para 1).

The Situationists, like their avant-garde predecessor the Surrealist group, sought to unify art and life. The Surrealists – to further this aim – tried, at one point in the group’s development, to ally their group with the French Communist Party. The Situationists, however, rejected the idea of making an alliance with a separate or alienated political avant-garde. Only an avant-garde which sought a fusion of art and life, they believed, could assist the ‘proletariat’ to achieve a revolution which embraces all areas of life. The Situationists proclaimed themselves to be such an avant-garde, and developed a theory and praxis of revolution in an attempt to realize, for all individuals, the unification of art and ‘everyday life’. It is this theory of revolution, and its relationship to both Marxism and anarchism, that I explore in this article.

The article is divided into the following sections. In the first section, I argue that the Situationists utilized the doctrines of the millenarian cults from the Middle Ages to express an ‘apocalyptic’ vision of revolution against ‘the spectacle’. In the second section, I suggest that although the Situationists took from the political group Socialisme ou Barbarie the notion that workers’ councils are organizations through which people can genuinely engage in a direct democracy, the Situationists implied that workers’ councils can become oriented towards the activity of play in contrast to Socialisme ou Barbarie, who argued that in a post-capitalist society organized by the councils there would be a ‘humanization of work’ (Castoriadis, 1993: 48). In the third section, I suggest that the Situationists’ conception of an avant-garde revolutionary organization is akin to the notion of a ‘secret society’ advanced by the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. In the fourth section, I argue that, to some extent, there are similarities between the Situationists’ ideas (formulated in the
latter half of the 20th century) and those of Bakunin (developed in a 19th century setting) concerning the social groups that they each identify as having revolutionary potential. I conclude that while the Situationists’ theory of revolution, in regard to some of its key features, corresponds to Bakunin’s vision of a revolutionary upheaval, the intellectual ancestry of the Situationists’ theory can be traced, chiefly, to the thought of Marx, the ideas of several Marxist thinkers, as well as to the ideas of pre-Situationist avant-garde ‘artists’.

**Millenarianism**

Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx’s long-time friend and collaborator, expressed his admiration for the 16th century millenarian revolutionary Thomas Münzer, remarking in *The Peasant War in Germany* (written in 1850) that:

> He was the first to formulate [communist notions] with a certain definiteness, and only after him do we find them in every great popular upheaval, until they gradually merge with the modern proletarian movement. (Marx and Engels, 1978: 415)

Engels also claimed that

> the so-called religious wars of the sixteenth century mainly concerned very positive material class interests; those wars were class wars, too, just as the later internal collisions in England and France. Although the class struggles of those days were clothed in religious shibboleths, and though the interests, requirements, and demands of the various classes were concealed behind a religious screen, this changed nothing at all and is easily explained by the conditions of the times. (Marx and Engels, 1978: 412)

Guy Debord, following in the footsteps of Engels, claims that ‘millenarianism, [was] the expression of a revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time’ (1995 [1967]: para 138). Yet, writing in the context of the 20th century, he adds that ‘[millenarianism] was already a modern revolutionary tendency’ (1995 [1967]: para 138). For Debord and the Situationists, the level of development of the productive forces had become so advanced that the millenarian vision of creating heaven on earth could no longer be considered a utopian project: the material abundance created made the rapid realization of this ‘utopia’ a real possibility. Furthermore, the Situationists, as we shall see, utilized millenarian doctrines to express an ‘apocalyptic’ vision of revolution, claiming that a proletarian uprising, against modern capitalism, would occur abruptly and rapidly overturn spectacular society.

In *The Movement of the Free Spirit* Raoul Vaneigem makes the following remark about the medieval heretical movement the Brethren of the Free Spirit:

> It is no longer possible simply to reiterate Free Spirit ideas, because the dominant language has changed its vocabulary, and, with the collapse of religious power, God has been eliminated … only to be replaced by ideas that are even more constipating, and made of the same fecal matter.³ (1994b [1986]: 235)

Vaneigem alludes here to the idea that, in a contemporary capitalist or ‘spectacular’ world, the doctrines of the medieval millenarians need to be subjected to détournement (diversion/subversion). This technique involves capturing ‘elements’ or things, such as images, phrases, ideas and so on, and reordering them to construct a ‘new context’ from which they now draw their meaning (Knabb, 2006: 14–21). *Détournement* ‘restores’ the real or authentic meaning of the elements in such a way that they ‘improve’ (Knabb, 2006: 230; see also Debord, 1995 [1967]: paras 206–207).
By drawing on medieval millenarian ideas in a modern capitalist context, and by inserting such ideas into a Marxist framework (see later sections), the Situationists advanced a conception of social change and personal emancipation that resembles the apocalyptic millenarian vision. Although they rejected the millenarians’ religious interpretation of the revolutionary process, namely the belief that a revolutionary upheaval is the work of God, the Situationists held, nevertheless, to an ‘apocalyptic’ notion of revolution.

Taking inspiration from Marx’s argument that capitalism would, at some point, undergo a severe crisis, and drawing particularly on both Georg Lukács’s as well as Henri Lefebvre’s ideas about a breakdown of capitalism, the Situationists argued that a revolutionary crisis arises when proletarians – who have managed to go beyond a ‘minimal consciousness of alienation’⁴ – rebel en masse against the ‘reification’ of ‘everyday life’.⁵ Such a rebellion, they suggested, would suddenly and completely undermine spectacular society, the crisis manifesting itself as a joyous, exuberant, Dionysian festival. Amidst this eruption of festivity, in which people playfully construct situations,⁶ ‘[t]he complete unchaining of pleasure’ enables ‘the construction of the whole man’ (Vaneigem, 1994a: 122); ‘forgotten desires’ are rediscovered and ‘entirely new ones’ fashioned (Knabb, 2006: 4). For instance, when writing about the revolutionary events of 1968 in France, the Situationists revel in quoting Lefebvre’s remarks, made in 1967, about their conception of such a revolutionary cataclysm:

The situationists … do not propose a concrete utopia, but an abstract one. Do they really imagine that one fine day or one decisive evening people will look at each other and say, ‘Enough! We’re fed up with work and boredom! Let’s put an end to them!’ and that they will then proceed into the eternal Festival and the creation of situations? Although this happened once, at the dawn of 18 March 1871 [the Paris Commune], this combination of circumstances will not occur again.⁷ (Knabb, 2006: 291)

The May-June uprising of 1968 in France was, for the Situationists, a modern day example of just such a subversive festival. More recently, sections of the so-called ‘anti-globalization’ movement have taken inspiration from the Situationists and created playful festivals to contest consumer-capitalism. For example: the joyous and confrontational ‘Carnival Against Capitalism’ held in London’s financial district on 18 June 1999 (as part of a global day of action) to coincide with the G8 summit in Cologne; the imaginative and disruptive direct actions at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle on 30 November 1999; the jubilant and rebellious ‘Reclaim the City’ street party held to protest against the June 2001 European Union summit in Gothenberg; and the disturbances – among clouds of tear gas – in the Italian port city of Genoa which hosted the G8 meeting during July 2001.⁸

Now, the Situationists – given their belief that ‘[t]he error that is at the root of surrealism is the idea of the infinite richness of the unconscious imagination’ (Knabb, 2006: 28–29) – claimed the following: that if each individual is to achieve self-realization and experience real freedom, this requires, in the words of Debord, a ‘conscious creation of situations’ (1992: 14). It is in this way that ‘poetry-made-by-all’⁹ (Vaneigem, 1994a [1967]: 200) can be realized. The Situationists argued, in this regard, that a sudden outburst of festivity is not sufficient to generate a post-capitalist ‘utopia’ that would endure. A form of organization is needed to bring forth a harmonization of the individual’s real creative and playful desires with those of all other individuals. The Situationists – who, as we shall see, drew on Surrealist ideas as well as the thought of Charles Fourier – envisaged a future playful society which features the workers’ council. It is this direct democratic organizational structure that could, they believed, serve to harmonize the real desires of each individual with those of all other individuals in a post-capitalist urban environment.
Workers’ Councils and the Situationists’ Conception of Play

The emergence of a division in the communist movement, between party and council communism, dates back to the period immediately following the end of the First World War (see Gombin, 1978: 103–118). It was during this historical period that revolutionary uprisings took place in Europe which led to the formation of workers’ councils. In Russia, the February 1917 Revolution saw soviets (workers’ councils) established. The October 1917 Revolution, however, was set in motion by a communist party rather than by the councils which had appeared some months earlier. The Bolsheviks based the legitimacy of the October Revolution on the support that they had attained within the soviets in the major cities. Yet the revolution they were about to embark upon, although initially supported (to some extent) by some Left Socialist Revolutionaries and anarchists (see Avrich, 1967; Liebman, 1984), would usher into existence a party dominated state rather than a council based communist society.

This failed attempt by a communist party to create a genuinely communist society was condemned by the Situationists (Debord, 1995 [1967]: paras 102–108; Knabb, 2006: 348–362). They severely criticized the Bolsheviks for suppressing the power of the workers’ councils and establishing party domination. Nevertheless, they insisted that the workers’ council movement had not been entirely crushed by ‘the Bolshevik counterrevolution’ (Knabb, 2006: 348). Indeed, René Reisel remarks that ‘the real tendency toward workers’ councils… has endured and constitutes the sole tribunal that will be able to pass judgment on the old world and carry out the sentence itself’ (Knabb, 2006: 348). The Situationists gained some of their ideas about council communism from the Socialisme ou Barbarie group. Debord had briefly been a member of this organization during 1960–1961 (Gray, 1998 [1974]: 5–6; Hastings-King, 1999: 26; Plant, 1992: 14–15). Socialisme ou Barbarie was formed in 1949 and disbanded in 1965; its two leading theorists were Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort (see Gombin, 1975; Hastings-King, 1999: 26–54; Hirsh, 1982: chapter 5). The group developed a critique of bureaucracy, which related both to Eastern ‘communist’ societies and Western capitalist societies, arguing that workers’ councils are organizational structures through which human beings can genuinely participate in a direct democracy (see Castoriadis, 1988: chapter 7). Debord incorporated such ideas about the workers’ councils into the theory he was developing for the Situationists.

However, whereas Socialisme ou Barbarie argued that in a post-capitalist society organized by workers’ councils there would be a ‘humanization of work’ (Castoriadis, 1993: 48), that is ‘the transformation of work … into the free development of the creative forces of individuals and groups’ (1993: 48), Debord and the Situationists imply that the councils can become concerned, for the most part, with playful activity. Yet, if workers’ councils are generated by groups of people engaged in a similar type of work, this appears incongruous with the claim that workers’ councils can be the direct democratic organizations of a society in which play is the predominant activity.

The Situationists suggest that the councils, although initially formed by workers in particular sectors of labour, can subsequently be transformed into organs of direct democracy for broader sections of the population. To quote Vaneigem:

Generalized self-management implies the extension of the councils. At first, work areas will be taken over by the workers concerned, grouped in councils. In order to rid these first councils of their corporative, guildlike aspect, the workers will as soon as possible open them to their friends, to people living in the same neighborhood, and to volunteers coming in from the parasitical sectors, so that they rapidly take the form of local councils – which might themselves be grouped together in ‘Communes’…. (Knabb, 2006: 370)

Of course, when the Situationists speak of self-management (through workers’ councils) in a post-capitalist society, it is not simply ‘the extension of the councils’ to encompass a wider range of
people – outside of the sphere of labour – that they have in mind. They claim that the councils, once established, can become institutions through which all individuals are able to participate in a process of direct democracy in a playful society.

The Situationists maintain that, following a revolutionary upheaval, much of the work that is presently undertaken by human beings could be replaced or abolished through automation and the abolition of the ‘parasitical sectors’ of labour. For the Situationists work is, I think, that activity undertaken to meet the needs of self-preservation or ‘survival’ – e.g. food and shelter (see Debord, 1995 [1967]: para 47; Vaneigem, 1994a [1967]: 236–237). In these circumstances, play would become the principal activity of all individuals. And real play, for the Situationists, as opposed to spectacular or commodified play, is a pleasurable activity through which individuals can attain self-realization. It is an activity which involves ‘rejection of all leaders and all hierarchies; rejection of self-sacrifice; rejection of roles; freedom of genuine self-realization; transparent social relationships’ (Vaneigem, 1994a [1967]: 258). In such a society, the Situationists suggest, individuals would engage in the dérive (see Knabb, 2006: 62–66), a technique whereby people walk or drift through the urban environment and, by consciously taking note ‘of the specific effects of the geographical environment … on [their] emotions and behavior’ (Knabb, 2006: 52), undertake ‘psychogeographical’ research. Those who carry out such research would then be able to draw up plans to restructure the city in accordance with their changing desires.

It should be noted at this point that historical examples of workers’ councils show that these organizations, formed by people engaged in a similar kind of labour, have not survived – as genuine direct democratic organizations – for a long period of time (i.e. years, decades, etc.). Arguably, their decline has taken place, in part, because the workers’ enthusiasm to participate in self-management wanes after the euphoria of the initial revolutionary period. What, then, makes the Situationists so optimistic that workers’ councils could become organs of direct democracy over the long term?

The Situationists make the assumption that work is universally undesirable, and – as we have seen – claim that real play can become the prevalent activity in a post-capitalist society. What this implies, I think, is a Situationist belief that workers’ councils, once formed, are likely to persist if they are mainly concerned with (authentic) play – an activity which is, they suggest, creative and pleasurable.

Yet the Situationists do not imagine that all self-management activities of the councils can be considered play. They suggest that some work (an activity engaged in to satisfy the needs of self-preservation) will remain necessary in a future society. And, although work might be playfully organized, it cannot become real play as it would not be fully pleasurable and creative. To put this another way, since the Situationists assume that work is universally detested, the self-management of this activity would appear to be a chore – it would not be something the members of the workers’ council would genuinely desire to do. Thus, a tension arises within the Situationists’ theory insofar as they imagine that some work will remain to be undertaken in a post-capitalist world. Nevertheless, if play can become the prevalent activity in a post-spectacular society, this issue of the councils’ decline as organs of direct democracy would not appear to pose a serious problem for their theory.

To recapitulate, we have seen that the Situationists’ vision of the councils differs from that of Socialisme ou Barbarie, who advanced a conception of workers’ councils based around the activity of (humanized) labour. The Situationists’ hostility to work, and their belief that play can become the predominant activity in a post-capitalist society organized by workers’ councils, takes their conception of the councils beyond that of Socialisme ou Barbarie or indeed previous council communist theorists (such as Anton Pannekoek – see below). What is pertinent here is the profound influence of Dada and the Surrealists on the Situationists. (This influence on the various
Situationist thinkers predates the incorporation of the workers’ councils into Situationist theory in the early 1960s.)

From the beginnings of the Situationist International (and before this, when those who would later become Situationists were participants in such groups as the Lettrists and COBRA), the members of the group were inspired by Dada and the Surrealists’ endeavour to unify art and life through playful activity. Some Dadaists and Surrealists believed that their project to ‘change life’15 could be furthered by aligning themselves with the communist movement. In France, the Surrealist group, under the guidance of André Breton, made overtures to the French Communist Party (PCF). The relationship that developed between the Surrealists and the PCF was, from the very beginning, strained. In 1927, Breton, in an attempt to overcome the PCF’s mistrust of the Surrealist group, became a member of the party (Lewis, 1990: 63). Nevertheless, the PCF periodically requested that Breton attend meetings with its control commission; this body sought assurances about the Surrealists’ commitment to the party (Lewis, 1990: 69–70). Breton described these meetings as ‘[resembling] nothing so much … as a police interrogation’ (Breton, cited in Lewis, 1990: 69). A point of contention between the Surrealists and the PCF concerned the issue of work or labour. Against party orthodoxy, the Surrealists, taking inspiration from the bohemian poet Arthur Rimbaud who proclaimed ‘I will never work’,16 declared themselves hostile to ‘work’. The Situationists, like the Surrealists, also expressed – like Rimbaud – a hatred of work and believed that ‘the poetry that changes life … transforms the world’ (Vaneigem, 1994a [1967]: 197).17 However, in contrast to the Surrealists, the Situationists rejected the idea of making an alliance with the communist party, given its hierarchical structure, its glorification of work and so on, and attempted to bring together an ‘artistic’ and a ‘political’ avant-garde in a unified revolutionary organization – one that embraced, in its own way, council communism.

The Situationists were also impressed by Johan Huizinga’s ideas in Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture (1955 [1938]). Constant,18 who had been a member of the avant-garde art group COBRA19 before he joined the Situationists, remarked, in his text ‘New Babylon’ (1974), that Huizinga had noted that historically Homo Ludens (man the player) had been ‘[situated] in the upper echelons of society, more precisely within the propertied leisure class, and not in the labouring masses’ (Constant, 1974: 2). Constant believed, however, that ‘automation [had] opened the way to a massive increase in the number of Homo Ludens’ (1974: 2).20 Huizinga argued that play involves ‘a stepping out of “real” life’ (1955 [1938]: 8). Yet, whereas Huizinga suggests that this ‘stepping out’ takes place within ‘a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own’ (1955 [1938]: 8), the Situationists maintain that ‘play, radically broken from a confined ludic time and space, must invade the whole of life’ (Situationist International, 1958).21 And to aid their theoretical construction of a future playful society, the Situationists turned to Charles Fourier’s utopian vision of a new society within a phalanstère (see Knabb, 2006: 169, 365, 369-370; Vaneigem, 1994a [1967]: 84,181,191, 201).

Fourier, a 19th century utopian socialist, devised a scheme for a planned cooperative, the Phalanx, in which work could become, he believed, an activity that was in harmony with the human passions. Fourier formulated a theory of ‘attractive labour’: through a particular arrangement of labour, he argued, work would be carried out by those Phalansterians who truly desired to undertake it. In this way, the various types of work in the Phalanx would be pleasurable for those who assumed such tasks (Beecher, 1986: chapter 14). Although the Situationists drew on Fourier’s conception of a phalanstère to develop their vision of a ‘unitary urbanist’city, they rejected his claim that work could become genuinely pleasurable. They also rejected his utopian blueprints for the specific social institutions that would exist in the future city. For the Situationists, it would be workers’ councils, organizations that had actually existed, which would shape the playful post-capitalist society.
That said, the Situationists’ ideas concerning the structure and role of an avant-garde organization differ from those advanced by thinkers in the council communist tradition. The Dutch Marxist Anton Pannekoek, for example, was a key council communist theoretician who developed his main ideas during the first quarter of the 20th century. His thoughts about council communism were developed in a context in which revolutionary uprisings had taken place in Russia, Germany and in various other European countries from 1917 to the early 1920s. Pannekoek believed that if the proletariat was to overturn capitalism and create a new society, it must overcome not only the ‘state power’ of the ruling class, but also a ‘state of spiritual dependence on the bourgeoisie’ (Pannekoek, cited in Bricianer, 1978: 124). Concerning the notion of an avant-garde group, the Situationists conceive of a revolutionary avant-garde as more interventionist than the organizations proposed by Pannekoek, who argued that (loose-knit) revolutionary groups should simply assist, on an intellectual level, the autonomous struggles of workers – such an avant-garde (on the Situationists’ reading) immediately disbanding when a proletarian uprising takes place (see Bricianer, 1978: chapter 12). Furthermore, the avant-garde they have in mind is unlike that put forward by Herman Gorter (another council communist), who argued that a communist party should aid the struggles of the proletariat (Gorter, 1978 [1921]). Rather, the Situationists’ conception of a revolutionary organization has more in common, I suggest, with Mikhail Bakunin’s notion of secret societies.

**Mikhail Bakunin, Revolutionary Organization and Secret Societies**

In his discussion of Mikhail Bakunin and secret societies, Debord – as we shall see – confusingly links the actual groups that Bakunin set up with the ideas that he outlined concerning such organizations. Brian Morris in *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom* (1993) argues that ‘three distinct entities’ can be identified as regards Bakunin’s revolutionary groups and his ideas about secret societies: ‘[f]irst, there is the Alliance itself, which was not a secret society, but an open section within the International … [s]econdly, there are the various small groups of the devotees that gathered around Bakunin to form the Revolutionary Brotherhood, and which formed the nucleus of the Alliance … [t]hirdly, there are the writings of Bakunin … which outline the aims and purposes of a secret society’ (Morris, 1993: 145–146). It is Bakunin’s writings about a secret society that are, I think, relevant to a discussion of the Situationists’ conception of an avant-garde organization. In the discussion that follows, I claim that the Situationists, given their misinterpretation of Bakunin, were critical of his notion of a ‘secret society’ and did not take from him ideas about this. Yet the Situationists’ conception of a revolutionary avant-garde does have, if we read Bakunin’s writings in a different way, an affinity with the ‘secret society’ sketched out by Bakunin.

Morris quotes a passage from a letter that Bakunin wrote to the French anarchist Albert Richard:

> Anarchy, the mutiny of all local passions and the awakening of spontaneous life at all points, must be well developed in order for the revolution to remain alive, real and powerful. Once the revolution has won its first victory (i.e. the overthrow of State power) we (unlike the political revolutionaries) must foment, awaken and unleash all the passions, we must produce anarchy and, like invisible pilots in the thick of the popular tempest, we must not steer it by any open power but by the collective dictatorship of all the allies – a dictatorship without insignia, titles or official rights, and all the stronger for having none of the paraphernalia of power. That is the only dictatorship I accept. (1993: 147)

Morris interprets this comment about a secret society as follows:

Bakunin clearly had in mind a post-revolutionary situation, akin to that which had occurred during the French revolution. And, he feared that in this context, those revolutionaries like Danton and Robespierre who insisted on setting up ‘Committees of Public Safety’ would inevitably betray the revolution, and lead
to reaction. His conception of a secret society therefore, which is to prepare and organize itself in advance of the revolution, is not to ‘impose’ the revolution on the people, or liberate it against their will, still less to be a ‘dictatorship’ (in the ordinary sense of this word), it is to continually agitate, ‘invisible’ amongst the populace, for anarchy – that is, for the self-management of the people. Nothing is further from the normal understanding of ‘dictatorship’. (Morris, 1993: 147–148)

So, a key concern for Bakunin in his writings about secret societies, a notable example of which is to be found in the letter (cited above) written to Richard more than 80 years after the outbreak of the 1789 Revolution, was the issue of how a group of revolutionaries, following a large-scale uprising, could defend the revolution and prevent a move towards authoritarian rule. That is to say, how a revolutionary avant-garde could uphold the people’s revolution and thwart any attempt to ‘protect’ the revolution by means of a centralized hierarchical institution wielding coercive or violent powers. The Situationists, writing in the post-Stalin era, advanced their ideas about an avant-garde organization over 40 years after the Bolshevik Revolution. It was the lingering impact of the 1917 Russian Revolution and its degeneration that, in part, shaped their thought. The Situationists’ conception of an avant-garde does, nevertheless, resemble Bakunin’s notion of a secret society.

Both Bakunin and the Situationists put forward the idea that, if a revolution is to be successful, an avant-garde group must assist the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed. Yet, they both also claim that, if a revolution is not to be betrayed, an avant-garde organization must not inflict its revolutionary vision on the population (see Bakunin’s letter to Sergei Nechaev dated 2 June 1870 cited in Lehning, 1973: 190–191; see also Knabb, 2006: 147–148). I think that both Bakunin and the Situationists imagined that a revolutionary group, prior to the outbreak of a popular uprising, should undertake the groundwork, the research (such as dérives in the case of the Situationists) and the organizational preparation necessary to intervene effectively in such an uprising. Moreover, both argued (as we shall see below) that when a popular rebellion takes place, the role of an avant-garde organization is to guide the uprising – without establishing itself as a rigid and formal ‘open power’ – towards popular self-management (see Debord, 1995 [1967]: paras 119–121; Morris, 1993: 147; Vaneigem, 1994a [1967]: 199, 273).

The Situationists, however, make unfavourable remarks about Bakunin’s attempts to form, as well as his ideas about, an avant-garde organization. In The Society of the Spectacle Debord suggests that the conflict between Marx and Bakunin within the First International ‘was clearly a clash between two ideologies of workers’ revolution’, and that ‘each [of these ideologies] embodied a partially correct critique’ (1995 [1967]: para 91). With respect to Bakunin, Debord states that:

Marx … charged Bakunin and his supporters with the authoritarianism of a conspiratorial elite that had deliberately placed itself above the International with the hare-brained intention of imposing on society an irresponsible dictatorship of the most revolutionary. (1995 [1967]: para 91)

Debord adds that ‘Bakunin unquestionably recruited followers on just such a basis’ (1995 [1967]: para 91), and quotes a section of the letter Bakunin wrote to Albert Richard – cited above – in support of this claim (1995 [1967]: para 91).

Debord, then, seems to think that Bakunin’s ‘secret society’ is essentially an authoritarian vision of revolutionary organization. Indeed, Bakunin does highlight the importance of ‘strict discipline’ within the secret society (see Guerin, 1998: 138). However, Morris points out that:

Bakunin makes it clear that this secret organization in no sense constitutes a revolutionary dictatorship; the ‘rigorous discipline’ is in the interests of the cause, and the ‘single will’ to be obeyed is that of the principles of the organization. (1993: 33)
Moreover, Bakunin speaks of the secret society as being ‘impregnated with the idea that it is the servant and helper of the people, and by no means their ruler’ (Bakunin’s letter of 2 June 1870 to Sergei Nechaev, cited in Lehning, 1973: 191). Furthermore, as Bakunin imagined a secret society to have a small number of members, such an organization would not appear to be in a position to force its revolutionary vision on the masses. In his 1869 ‘Programme of the International Brotherhood’, for instance, Bakunin suggests that ‘[o]ne hundred revolutionaries … would suffice for the international organization of all of Europe’ (cited in Dolgoff, 1980: 155). In the same article (in a sentence that immediately follows the one just cited) Bakunin also maintains, apparently addressing the issue of a secret society at the national level, that ‘[t]wo or three hundred revolutionaries will be enough for the organization of the largest country’ (Dolgoff, 1980: 155). In either case the danger that a secret society with such numbers might develop into a despotic ‘revolutionary’ bureaucracy is, I think, negligible.²⁸

Therefore, if Bakunin rules out the idea that his ‘secret society’ should attempt to inflict its revolutionary vision on the population, and if such a secret society would not dissolve itself as soon as a revolutionary uprising breaks out (unlike Pannekoek’s loose-knit parties or groups), such a conception of an avant-garde group is akin to that put forward by the Situationists (see Knabb, 2006: 361; Vaneigem, 1994a [1967]: 273–274). The Situationists have, then, if we accept Morris’s interpretation of Bakunin’s ‘secret society’, misinterpreted Bakunin’s theoretical ideas about a revolutionary avant-garde.

Nevertheless, Debord maintains – adopting Marx’s critical appraisal of Bakunin – that Bakunin did ‘[recruit followers in order to impose] on society an irresponsible dictatorship of the most revolutionary (or of those self-designated as such)’ (Debord, 1995 [1967]: para 91). So, through drawing on Marx’s critique of Bakunin and his supporters within the International, and by conflating Marx’s criticism of Bakunin with an uncharitable reading of Bakunin’s theoretical remarks about revolutionary organization, Debord concludes that – in this particular respect – Bakunin was an authoritarian who sought to establish an ‘irresponsible dictatorship’ of an elite group of revolutionaries.

Now, if we leave to one side Bakunin’s theoretical writings about a secret society and focus instead on his Revolutionary Brotherhood group and the ‘secret Alliance’ within the International, it can be argued that Debord unjustly accuses Bakunin of ‘[recruiting followers to impose] on society an irresponsible dictatorship of the most revolutionary’ (1995: para 91), that is to say, of establishing an authoritarian organization. The historian E.H. Carr comments on the secret Alliance, which was allegedly formed following the disbanding of the ‘public Alliance … on the demand of the General Council [of the International]’ (Carr, 1975: 420), as follows:

The question of the existence of the secret Alliance divided and bewildered the Hague Congress [of the International in 1872]. It has divided subsequent commentators … In fact, the question is not one which can be answered by an unqualified affirmative or an unqualified negative. The evidence of Bakunin himself is significantly contradictory. ‘I sit in my corner,’ he said once at Locarno, ‘and quietly weave my spider’s web.’ But the gossamer was so fine that he could not always see it himself. He would whip up the enthusiasm of his Spanish supporters by telling them that in Italy ‘our dear Alliance has spread far and wide.’ Yet in controversy with Marx and the General Council he could declare, with equal aplomb, that the secret Alliance ‘had never existed except in their imagination.’ This last statement is certainly untrue. The secret Alliance existed in the imagination of Bakunin himself and those of his friends who took seriously everything that he said or wrote; and since his Spanish friends belonged to that category, it existed as a local organization in Spain. Elsewhere, it can scarcely be said to have had an objective existence. (Carr, 1975: 421)

Carr also quotes a comment by Guillaume – ‘one of Bakunin’s warmest admirers and closest collaborators’ (Carr, 1975: 421) – about Bakunin and his revolutionary groups:
Bakunin writes to Morago [commented Guillaume many years later on one of Bakunin’s Spanish letters] as to an International Brother (which he was not) and, giving free rein to his imagination, paints a picture of an organization which existed only theoretically in Bakunin’s brain as a kind of dream indulged in with delight, a chimaera formed in the clouds of his cigarette smoke. (Carr, 1975: 421)

Taking these interpretations of the organizations Bakunin ‘established’ into consideration, and, in addition, taking account of the fact that Bakunin was critical of Nechaev’s conspiratorial methods,29 Debord’s critique of Bakunin’s ‘authoritarianism’ emerges as excessively harsh.

If we recall that Bakunin, in his writings about a secret society, envisions such an organization remaining in existence following an uprising of the oppressed, so that it can ‘invisibly’ guide the course of the revolution towards the self-management of the people, then there is, despite Debord’s criticism of Bakunin, a resemblance between the Situationists’ conception of a revolutionary avant-garde and that advanced by Bakunin.

Both Bakunin and the Situationists maintain that members of an avant-garde group should be carefully selected and would – so to speak – constitute a revolutionary ‘elite’ (see Bakunin’s letter of 1 April 1870 to Albert Richard, in Lehning, 1973: 180–181; see also Knabb, 2006: 148, 172). Yet this would not be an ‘elite’ that seeks to direct, de haut en bas, the struggles of the oppressed. Rather, this group would ‘invisibly’ assist the struggles of the oppressed in a non-unilateral manner.30 To quote Vaneigem:

the project of massing poetry’s disparate forces presupposes the ability to recognize or catalyse autonomous revolutionary groups, to radicalize and federate them, without ever assuming leadership. A group such as the Situationist International has an axial function: the function of operating everywhere as an axis which is rotated in the first instance by the power of popular resistance, but which increases this initial motor energy and disseminates it. (1994a [1967]: 273)

So, an avant-garde, in the course of a popular uprising, spreads its ideas and practices throughout the population, and these enhance the (real) creative passions – or put another way, the revolutionary self-activity – of proletarians. Moreover, for the Situationists and – as we saw earlier – for Bakunin, the aim of a (genuine) revolution is the self-management of the people, and a revolutionary avant-garde should, without setting itself up as an ‘open power’, guide the revolution towards this eventuality.

Furthermore, if we consider that, in their particular writings, both the Situationists and (roughly speaking a century before them) Bakunin recognize the revolutionary potential of various marginalized social groups, then it appears that there are some additional similarities to the two theories. To address this issue, I shall now turn to a discussion about classes and the revolutionary process.

**Bakunin, Marxism and Class**

Unlike Marx’s theory of proletarian revolution, which rests upon the action of an organized and class-conscious urban proletariat, Bakunin envisages a social upheaval involving

those millions of the uncultivated, the dispossessed, the miserable, the illiterates … that great rabble of the people … ordinarily designated by Marx and Engels in the picturesque and contemptuous phrase Lumpenproletariat. (Dolgoff, 1980: 294, emphasis in the original Bakunin text)

In his writings Bakunin makes both the claim that the lumpenproletariat ‘alone is powerful enough … to inaugurate and bring to triumph the Social Revolution’ (Dolgoff, 1980: 294)31 and the claim that industrial workers together with other oppressed social groups, such as peasants and youth,
have the strength to bring to fruition a social revolution (Shatz, 1990: 212–217). It is the latter claim, as we shall see, that has a bearing on the topic under discussion.

In the argument that follows, I examine which social groups the Situationists identify as having revolutionary potential. Although it must be borne in mind that the Situationists emerged from the avant-garde artistic milieu, I shall, given the influence of ‘political’ writers on this aspect of their thought, mainly focus my attention on how Situationist ideas on this issue relate to those of Marx and Bakunin.

The Situationists claim that a ‘proletarian revolution’ is highly likely to take place against modern capitalist society. However, their conception of the proletariat is idiosyncratic when compared with Marxist orthodoxy. The Situationists draw on Lukács’s argument that it is the proletariat that can attain a revolutionary consciousness – that is to say, a consciousness of the totality of capitalist society which empowers this class to liberate itself and the whole of humanity from a reified capitalist world. Nevertheless, they advance, in contrast to Lukács, a broader conception of the proletariat than the orthodox or classical Marxian view: alongside industrial workers and labourers involved in the capitalist process of production, they add various other oppressed social strata.

The Situationists include a large part of service sector labour within the proletariat. Debord claims that the proletariat ‘is objectively reinforced … by the extension of the logic of the factory system to a broad sector of labor in the “services” and the intellectual professions’ (1995 [1967]: para 114). In History and Class Consciousness, Lukács argued that ‘the basic structure of reification…can only be made fully conscious in the work-situation of the proletarian’ (Lukács, 1983 [1923]: 171–172). As Lukács writes,

[the proletarian’s] work as he experiences it directly possesses the naked and abstract form of the commodity, while in other forms of work this is hidden behind the facade of ‘mental labour’, of ‘responsibility’, etc. … Corresponding to the objective concealment of the commodity form, there is the subjective element. This is the fact that while the process by which the worker is reified and becomes a commodity dehumanizes him and cripples and atrophies his ‘soul’ – as long as he does not consciously rebel against it – it remains true that precisely his humanity and his soul are not changed into commodities. He is able therefore to objectify himself completely against his existence while the man reified in the bureaucracy, for instance, is turned into a commodity, mechanized and reified in the only faculties that might enable him to rebel against reification. (1983 [1923]: 172)

In other words, Lukács maintains that those individuals who engage in bureaucratic or intellectual labour, in contrast to workers involved in the process of production, are unable to prevent their ‘thoughts and feelings [from becoming] reified’ (Lukács, 1983 [1923]: 172).

Of course, the Situationists were writing in a different historical context to that of Lukács; arguably, the particular white collar labourers (in the expanded service sector of the post-war economy) that they designate as proletarians differ from the intellectual workers that Lukács suggests are unable to offer resistance to reification. And if it is the case, as Debord implies, that much of the labour in the post-war service sector is analogous to the work of labourers involved in the production process, in the sense that this white collar labour is more noticeably debasing, then the humanity of these workers cannot be commodified. Such white collar workers would, therefore, have the potential to rebel against reification.

So, the Situationists include within the proletariat both those workers involved in the process of production as well as those white collar workers in the service sector who possess the ability to rebel against reification. That said, the proletariat, for the Situationists, comprises not only blue and (a large part of) white collar labour, but also various social groups on the margins of, or outside of, the system of wage labour. For instance, ‘youth’ is a social group that the Situationists connect to the ‘new proletariat’. As they write:
Much can be expected of … the new proletariat, which is discovering its destitution amid consumer abundance (see … the attitudes of rebellious youth in all the modern countries). (Knabb, 2006: 122)

Before the emergence of the Situationist International, Debord, as well as a number of other individuals who would later become Situationists, had been involved with the artistic avant-garde group known as the Lettrists, a group formed by Isidore Isou, a Romanian poet, in 1945. The Lettrists, like the Dadaists and Surrealists, believed that their ‘artistic’ experiments to recreate poetry, painting, film and so on, could be fused with the whole of life; one way in which the Lettrists attempted this was by undertaking playfully provocative actions to unleash the revolutionary potential of ‘youth’ (see Foster, 1983; Marcus, 1989; Schlatter, 1989).34 Taking this notion to the Situationist group, Debord, and the other former Lettrists, sought to foment student rebellion in the universities. At Strasbourg University, in 1966, a band of militant students linked with the Situationists stood in the election for the students’ union and were voted into office (Plant, 1992: 94). These radicals then declared that they planned to disband the union. In addition, using union money, they published the Situationist tract *On the Poverty of Student Life* – principally written by Mustapha Khayati35 (an SI member) – and distributed it to students (Gray, 1998 [1974]: 68–69). These actions caused such a disturbance that the university took legal action to thwart the union’s activities (Plant, 1992: 95).

*On the Poverty of Student Life* contained a withering critique of student life in a consumer-capitalist society. Commenting on the impact of this pamphlet on youth in various countries, the Situationists suggested that:

> The theses of *On the Poverty of Student Life* have been much more truly understood in the United States and in England (the strike at the London School of Economics in March caused a certain stir, the *Times* commentator unhappily seeing in it a return of the class struggle he had thought was over with). (Knabb, 2006: 272–273)

The implication, here, is that student rebellion is associated with the class struggle of the ‘new proletariat’. Moreover, in *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord claims that along with ‘anti-union struggles of Western workers’,

> …rebellious tendencies among the young generate a protest that is still tentative and amorphous … These are two sides of the same coin, both signaling a new spontaneous struggle emerging under the sign of *criminality*, both portents of a second proletarian onslaught on class society. (1995 [1967]: para 115)

Once again, the implication is that revolts by the young and workers can be considered as *proletarian* struggles, both groups engaging in a battle against the consumer-capitalist system. For the Situationists, the most notable example of the (new) proletariat’s resistance against the spectacular society was the festive uprising of May 1968 in France, which, as they put it, saw ‘the increasingly complete collapse of state power for nearly two weeks’ (Knabb, 2006: 288). What began as a student revolt developed into a broader rebellion including marginalized youths and millions of workers; this culminated in what the Situationists termed ‘the first *wildcat general strike* in history’ (Knabb, 2006: 288, emphasis in the original SI text).

In more recent times, rebellions of marginalized youth have taken place in France and England. In France, towards the end of 2005, riots took place in the banlieues, youths burning cars and clashing with the police. In England, in early August 2011, youths rioted in London and a number of other cities, burning buildings and looting goods. Like the 1965 Watts rioters in Los Angeles, who the Situationists admired, these rioters, through the activity of looting, ‘instantly [destroy] the
commodity as such’ (Knabb, 1989: 155), and ‘rediscover a use [for goods seized from shops] that immediately refutes the oppressive rationality of the commodity’ (Knabb, 2006: 197). Furthermore, just as the Situationists argued that the Watts rioters ‘took’ modern capitalist propaganda, its publicity of abundance, literally’ (Knabb, 2006: 197), and that the ‘looting of the Watts district was the most direct realization of the distorted principle, “To each according to his false needs”’ (Knabb, 1989: 155), so this could be argued in relation to the riots in France and England in recent years. Moreover, these disaffected urban youths could, as Vaneigem suggests, be seen as a social group that has the potential to ‘become the catalyst of a widescale reversal of perspective’ (1994a [1967]: 242); that is to say, a group that, through its collective revolt, might generate a larger rebellion, drawing millions of worker-consumers into the struggle against consumer-capitalism. That said, in the post-war period no large-scale popular rebellion in the industrially advanced societies, whether triggered by the revolt of students or marginalized youths, has, to date, managed to overturn capitalist power structures for a period of time sufficient to make a ‘lasting revolutionary victory’ (Knabb, 2006: 317) likely.

Another marginalized social group that the Situationists link to the ‘new proletariat’ is the ‘lumpenproletariat’. Vaneigem claims that this stratum, which Marx perceived to be reactionary, now has a positive contribution to make to the revolutionary struggle of the ‘new proletariat’. As he writes,

the lumpenproletariat embodies a remarkably radical implicit critique of the society of work. Its open contempt for both lackeys and bosses contains a good critique of work as alienation… (Knabb, 2006: 164)

However, the lumpenproletariat’s ‘implicit critique’ of alienated labour has not been recognized for two reasons: firstly, because this social stratum has been viewed (by orthodox Marxists) as ‘an ambiguous sector’ – for instance, ‘as a source of recruits for the more dubious forces of order’ (Knabb, 2006: 164); and secondly, for the reason that humankind’s ‘struggle against the blind domination of nature’ (Knabb, 2006: 118) – during an earlier phase of capitalism – and its task of improving material production, ‘still appeared as valid justifications for work’ (Knabb, 2006: 164).

Yet,

Once it became known that the abundance of consumer goods was nothing but the flip side of alienation in production, the lumpenproletariat acquired a new dimension: it liberated a contempt for organized work… (Knabb, 1989: 126–127)

In other words, once proletarians become aware that the alienation they experience outside of work is generated by a system of alienated production, they acquire a disdainful attitude towards a society based upon work or wage-labour. Moreover, given that the lumpenproletariat stands outside of the organised labour process, and has scorn for the employers and their obsequious hangers-on, it is a social group that shows (albeit implicitly) to those proletarians in work that others among the oppressed reject the society of labour. Indeed, Vaneigem claims ‘that the new proletariat can be negatively defined as a “Front Against Forced Labor” bringing together all those who resist cooperation by power’ (Knabb, 2006: 164).

Furthermore, the Situationists make the following claim about the ‘new proletariat’: that this class ‘is tending to encompass virtually everybody’ (Knabb, 2006: 111). In the following passage they elaborate on this claim:

In the context of the reality presently beginning to take shape, we may consider as proletarians all people who have no possibility of altering the social space-time that the society allots to them (regardless of
variations in their degree of affluence or chances for promotion). The rulers are those who organize this space-time, or who at least have a significant margin of personal choice … The distinction drawn here between those who organize space-time (together with their direct agents) and those who are subjected to that organization is intended to clearly reveal the polarization that is obscured by the intentionally woven complexity of the hierarchies of function and salary, which gives the impression that all the gradations are virtually imperceptible and that there are scarcely any more real proletarians or real capitalists at the two extremities of a social spectrum that has become highly flexible. Once this distinction is posed, other differences in status must be considered as secondary. (Knabb, 2006: 141–142)

For the Situationists, the ‘new proletariat’ embraces a wider range of oppressed social strata when compared with Marx’s conception of the proletarian class. Aside from ‘those [people] who organize… [the spectacle’s] space-time, or who at least have a significant margin of personal choice’ (Knabb, 2006: 141), almost all others, apart from peasants – see below – are to be considered proletarians. The Situationists argue that ‘the spectacle’ has powers of mystification that envelop ‘everyday life’. People are dominated by the spectacle in almost all areas of their lives: at work, at home, in the street, in shopping centres, cinemas, and so on. And it is because the commodity-form has spread to most areas of social life, extending its rule over individuals, whether wage-earners or not, that almost everyone, the Situationists argue, can be designated a proletarian.

Indeed, by theorizing modern capitalist society as a spectacle, the Situationists have interpreted Marx’s class analysis and his theory of revolution in an unconventional or unorthodox manner. The Situationists draw on Marx’s notion, outlined in *The Communist Manifesto*, that capitalist society is divided ‘into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat’ (Marx and Engels, 2002 [1848]: 220). They also make use of Lukács’s concept of reification, claiming that reification has spread to nearly all parts of lived experience. Furthermore, they proceed to argue, given their belief that blue collar and (a large part of) white collar labour, as well as youth, students and the lumpenproletariat have the potential to rebel against reification, the following: that within the advanced capitalist societies the revolt of almost all oppressed or subordinate social groups is proletarian rebellion – whether undertaken by active nihilists, those who have begun to develop a (left-wing) revolutionary consciousness or those who have attained a highly developed revolutionary consciousness (a consciousness of the totality of modern capitalist society).37

There is, however, one oppressed social group that the Situationists do not include within the proletariat: this is the peasantry. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord claims that the proletariat ‘is objectively reinforced by the peasantry’s gradual disappearance’ (1995 [1967]: para 114). He does not claim that peasants can be considered to be proletarians, but, rather, implies that with the increasing development of industrial capitalism, the peasantry slowly diminishes and the proletariat increases in size as those who were formerly peasants working on the land become (oppressed) wage-labourers or join the marginalized social strata of the cities (‘youth’, those outside of the wage-labour system, etc.).

Thus far in the discussion, we have seen that the Situationists claim that the following social groups, which comprise the ‘new proletariat’, have revolutionary potential: that is, workers, youth, students and the lumpenproletariat. The Situationists’ theory of revolution, in this respect, corresponds to that of Bakunin. Yet the peasantry, for Bakunin, who developed his ideas in the 19th century, features prominently within his theory of revolution. The Situationists, as we have seen, argued – taking this idea from Marx (see below) – that along with the development of industrial capitalism the peasantry would diminish.38 Nevertheless, the question arises: do they imagine that the peasantry – in a contemporary capitalist or ‘spectacular’ world – has a contribution to make towards the revolutionary struggle?
Some positive remarks about the revolutionary potential of the ‘third world’ can be found in the Situationists’ oeuvre (see Knabb, 2006: 122; Vaneigem, 1994a [1967]: 74). However, the general thrust of their thought, in this respect, adheres to the Eurocentric orthodox Marxist notion that the pivotal struggles are not to be found in the underdeveloped world, where peasants make up the majority of the population, but rather, in the industrially advanced world (see Knabb, 2006: 111). The Situationists maintain, for instance, that anti-imperialist struggles in the ‘third world’ (mostly, but not entirely, undertaken by the peasantry) act to disrupt the balance of power between (what were at the time) the ‘opposed’ Eastern and Western bloc spectacular societies (Knabb, 2006: 111, 281–285). Yet they also claim that ‘the movements in the underdeveloped zone seem doomed to follow the model of the Chinese revolution’ (Knabb, 2006: 111). The implication, then, is that it is only in the industrially advanced societies, in which urban proletarians constitute the majority of the population, that revolution could bring forth a post-spectacular world.

Thus, in a modern capitalist context, peasant struggles are, the Situationists suggest, subsidiary to proletarian rebellion. For the Situationists, it is the ‘new proletariat’, in the materially abundant industrially advanced societies, that is in a position to overthrow the global spectacle and create a revolution that will persist. Now, the Situationists’ theory of revolution accords with that of Marx in the following respect: they believe that for a revolution to have the possibility of creating a communist society, the productive forces must have reached an advanced level of development, and that there must be in existence a vast urban proletariat which could overthrow capitalist society. However, their conception of the proletariat is unorthodox when compared with classical Marxist thought.

For the Situationists, this class is composed not only of industrial workers and labourers involved in the production process, but also of white collar labourers in the service sector and various marginalized groups. Marx had developed his ideas concerning the proletariat in the 19th century during an earlier phase of capitalism; that is, prior to the rise of industries which required a vast supply of intellectual workers. In such historical circumstances, Marx conceived the proletariat to be, largely, that group of labourers engaged in production. Insofar as the Situationists include a considerable part of white collar labour – as well as socially marginalized groups – within their conception of the proletariat, their view of this class diverges from the orthodox Marxian view.

Moreover, by suggesting that various socially marginalized groups, together with workers, are at the forefront of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism, the Situationists’ thought corresponds to that of Bakunin. Indeed, in contrast to Marx, who considered that the lumpenproletariat did not have the revolutionary potential that he saw in the industrial proletariat, both Bakunin and – in a 20th century context – the Situationists have claimed that the ‘lumpenproletariat’ and the industrial proletariat are social groups which have considerable revolutionary potential.

Writing in the period from the 1840s to the 1870s, a time during which, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, ‘for by far the greater part of humanity, the fortunes of life still depended on what happened to and on the land’ (1988: 205), Bakunin argued that the peasantry would have a prominent role in the revolutionary process. In the Situationists’ theory of revolution, however, this class is given (at most) a subsidiary role in the struggle to overturn modern capitalism. As mentioned above, the Situationists argue that with the development of capitalism there is a ‘gradual disappearance’ of the peasantry. Furthermore, the Situationists suggest that the tendency for the peasantry to diminish has increased the numbers within the ‘new proletariat’, a class which comprises workers and marginalized groups.

So the Situationists, drawing on Marx’s thought, argue that with the development of industrial capitalism, people who once worked on the land move to cities, swelling the numbers of workers and those within marginalized social groups (such as students and the lumpenproletariat). They
also accept Marx’s notion that the ‘proletariat’ is the universal class. Nevertheless, their views concerning which social strata have revolutionary potential resemble those of Bakunin in the following sense: both the Situationists and – in a 19th century context – Bakunin argue that socially marginalized groups and workers are either currently involved in, or are on the cusp of, a rebellion that will bring about the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

**Conclusion**

The Situationists’ theory of revolution, in some of its central features, corresponds to Bakunin’s vision of a revolutionary upheaval (advanced during an earlier phase of capitalism): both theories outline a vision of a social revolution which involves workers as well as groups on the margins of capitalist society; and both outline a similar role for an avant-garde group within this process. Although the Situationists were critical of Bakunin’s notion of a ‘secret society’ (given their misinterpretation of Bakunin on this issue) and did not take from him ideas about this, both Bakunin’s ideas and those of the Situationists about the role of a revolutionary avant-garde follow similar paths. Yet the Situationists developed this theory of revolution by drawing, for the most part, on the ideas of Marx, on the thought of several Marxist writers, as well as on the ideas of pre-Situationist ‘artists’ in the avant-garde artistic milieu.

The Situationists claim that a proletarian revolution will take place, in part, in a spontaneous manner. Using ideas taken from the Marxist philosophers Lukács and Lefebvre, the Situationists argue that when proletarians (who have managed to progress beyond a ‘minimal consciousness’ of capitalist domination) rebel en masse against the reification of everyday life, a revolutionary crisis of capitalism can ensue. Furthermore, the Situationists incorporate into their theory the council communists’ notion that proletarians engaged in a similar type of work can, by their own efforts, create workers’ councils which are organizations through which people can genuinely participate in a process of direct democracy.

Yet the Situationists also suggest that a revolutionary avant-garde organization, distinct from the workers’ councils, will be required, following the formation of the councils, to assist (a majority of) proletarians to attain a highly developed revolutionary consciousness. In other words, the Situationists argue that although there is a spontaneous component to proletarian revolution, the intervention of a revolutionary avant-garde – akin, as I have argued, to that of a ‘secret society’ (based on Morris’s interpretation of Bakunin) – is needed to ensure that the workers’ councils develop in such a way that a genuine revolution occurs. In this connection the Situationists imply that the councils can be transformed into direct democratic organizations oriented towards authentic **play** – an activity that individuals find to be genuinely desirable, and through which they can achieve self-realization. Moreover, their claim that play can become the **predominant** activity in a post-capitalist society, implies an assumption that the workers’ councils, provided they are largely concerned with play, are likely to persist following a revolutionary uprising.

Further, the Situationists utilize, within a Marxist framework, the doctrines of the millenarian movements from the Middle Ages to express an ‘apocalyptic’ vision of revolution. This emphasizes that a revolution against ‘the spectacle’ will take place abruptly, when a majority of proletarians develop an awareness of the whole or totality of capitalist society; it will also rapidly establish a post-spectacular society, modern capitalism having already generated the material abundance which permits self-realization for all here and now. Moreover, by taking inspiration from the ideas and activities of the Surrealists, as well as the thought of Fourier and Huizinga, the Situationists imagine that spectacular society will, ‘one fine day’, be toppled through an eruption of **playful** activity. Indeed, Huizinga remarks in *Homo Ludens* that
at any moment, even in a highly developed civilization, the play -‘instinct’ may reassert itself in full force, drowning the individual and the mass in the intoxication of an immense game. (1955 [1938]: 47)

A sudden outbreak of (real) playful situations, which subvert modern capitalism’s powers of mystification, is precisely what the Situationists have in mind when they speak of revolution. Given the tenuous integration of the proletariat within the spectacle, a cataclysmic upheaval can break out ‘at any moment’, the old world being turned upside down and transformed into a playful festival, ‘an immense game’.

To summarize, the Situationists’ theory of revolution, in regard to some of its key characteristics, has a close affinity with Bakunin’s revolutionary vision. Yet the intellectual ancestry of the Situationists’ theory can be traced, chiefly, to the thought of Marx, the ideas of several Marxist thinkers (such as Lukács, Lefebvre and the council communists), as well as to the thought of pre-Situationist avant-garde ‘artists’ (such as the Surrealists and the Lettrists). Nevertheless, it must be stressed that, by conceptualizing modern capitalist society as a spectacle, the Situationists interpreted Marx’s class analysis and his theory of revolution in an unorthodox fashion, arguing that as reification has spread to nearly all areas of social life, the revolt of almost all oppressed or subordinate social groups (with the exception, that is, of the peasantry) is proletarian rebellion. Furthermore, it is an interpretation that suggests that the proletariat, which comprises (blue- and white-collar) worker-consumers and socially marginalized groups, can bring forth the emancipation of all human beings through a playful revolution, the activity of (real) play enabling ‘the abolition and the realization of art [which] are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art’ (Debord, 1995 [1967]: para 191).

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Notes
1. In this article my discussion of anarchism vis-à-vis Situationist theory is confined to Bakunin’s collectivist anarchist vision. I should add that, in their writings, the Situationists do speak about other currents of anarchist thought and praxis. For instance, Debord, in The Society of the Spectacle, makes the following derogatory remark about individualist anarchism: ‘the claims of anarchism in its individualist variants are laughable’ (1995 [1967]: para 92). As regards the revolution in Spain during 1936, Debord suggests that: ‘In 1936 anarchism really did lead a social revolution, setting up the most advanced model of proletarian power ever realized’ (1995 [1967]: para 94). The Situationists also mention, at times, the ‘anarchist’ thought of Max Stirner and that current of anarchism which practised the ‘propaganda of the deed’. For a discussion of the impact of Stirner’s thought and the history of anarchist bank robbers and bombers on the Situationists, see my PhD thesis (Eagles, 2005).

2. To quote Vaneigem from The Revolution of Everyday Life: ‘The facts themselves will soon come to the aid of the mass of men in their struggle to enter at long last that state of freedom aspired to – though they lacked the means of attaining it – by those Swabian heretics of 1270 mentioned by Norman Cohn in his Pursuit of the Millennium, who “said that they had mounted up above God and, reaching the very pinnacle of Divinity, abandoned God. Often the adept would affirm that he or she had no longer any need of God”’ (1994a [1967]: 167). The Situationists derived some of their knowledge of the revolutionary millenarian and heretical movements of the Middle Ages from Norman Cohn’s book. See Cohn (1993
For a discussion of millenarianism and peasant movements in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, see Hobsbawm (1959: 57–107).

3. Although it must be borne in mind that Vaneigem’s book The Movement of the Free Spirit (1994b [1986]) is a post-SI text, I think that the cited remark does nevertheless also relate to the earlier thought of the Situationist group.

4. See Arato and Breines (1979) for a discussion of Lukács’s concept of reification and what Arato and Breines term a ‘minimal consciousness of alienation’. To quote Arato and Breines: ‘It is perfectly rational for the capitalist to treat labor time, its increase and decrease, as a merely quantitative problem. The worker, too, may (even must) think of labor time and its wage “equivalent” in this way. But in all aspects of his everyday life he is affected by all changes in his labor time qualitatively. Labor time is the “determining form of his existence as a human being”…The worker’s labor time is integrated into the objective side of production, but it can never become wholly quantitative for the worker. This means that the worker alone recognizes something qualitative on the objective side. This does not alter his alienation, but it has made one aspect of it conscious. Lukács builds the objective possibility of a rupture in the reified world based on the necessity of what we would call a minimal consciousness of alienation. He argues that the worker’s minimal consciousness of a qualitative aspect of the commodity labor time represents the beginning of the dissolution of fetishistic forms’ (1979: 134).


6. Debord makes the following remark about a constructed situation: ‘The situation is … designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing “public” must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, “livers”, must steadily increase’ (Knabb, 2006: 41). In this connection I should add that the Situationists attempt to fuse a conception of personal emancipation with Marx’s model of social revolution. The Situationists argue that spectacular society’s powers of recuperation or co-option – its ability to absorb authentic dissent through the process of commodification – make it difficult for lone individuals or small groups of individuals to live life authentically here and now – see, for instance, Vaneigem (1999 [1977]: 59–60, 95–96). Yet, they maintain that some individuals, whom Vaneigem terms ‘the hopeless cases … who reject all roles and those who develop a theory and practice of this refusal’ (1994a [1967]: 135), can manage, to some extent, to realize immediately their (authentic) desires through creating ‘art’ in accordance with what Vaneigem terms ‘the lesser, everyday pleasures of love, iconoclasm and obedience to the dictates of passion!’ (1994a [1967]: 277). That said, the Situationists insist that living authentically here and now requires that individuals do not create separate or specialized works of art, but rather create ‘art’ that is unified with the ‘everyday’; for instance, through undertaking dérives and constructing situations. Put another way, the Situationists believe that individual or collective attempts to create alternative ways of living in the present need to take account of the totality of the revolutionary process. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Eagles (2005).

7. To give some further examples from the Situationists’ oeuvre: Vaneigem remarks, in relation to a number of riots that had taken place in various cities around the world – for instance, in the Watts district of Los Angeles during 1965 – that: ‘Boredom breeds the irresistible rejection of uniformity, a refusal that can break out at any moment. Stockholm, Amsterdam and Watts (for a start) have shown that the tiniest of pretexts can fire the oil spread on troubled waters (1994a [1967]: 91). And Debord writes, ‘We must conclude that a changeover is imminent and ineluctable in the coopted cast who serve the interests of domination, and above all manage the protection of that domination. In such an affair, innovation will surely not be displayed on the spectacle’s stage. It appears instead like lightning, which we know only when it strikes’ (1990 [1988]: 88).


9. The Situationists took this phrase from Lautréamont (1978: 279). The Surrealists – several decades before the emergence of the Situationist group – had also been influenced by Lautréamont.
10. René Reisel was a member of the SI from 1968 to 1971.

11. The Situationists do, however, warn against the danger of the emergence of an ‘ideology’ of the councils - meant in Marx’s critical sense of the term. See Knabb (2006: 352).

12. Vaneigem defines the ‘parasitical sectors’ as ‘administration, bureaucratic agencies, spectacle production, purely commercial industries’ (Knabb, 2006: 369).

13. Vaneigem, when discussing the ‘first revolutionary measures’ to be carried out by the workers’ councils, mentions ‘priority sectors’ of labour that could not be abolished –that is, those concerned with ‘food, transportation, telecommunications, metallurgy, construction, clothing, electronics, printing, armament, health care, comfort, and in general whatever material equipment is necessary for the permanent transformation of historical conditions’ (Knabb, 2006: 369). Furthermore, in one of his letters, Debord, when commenting on the issue of labour and the automation of production, makes the following remark about work: ‘As far as collecting the garbage, for my part I would quite willingly accept such work for a few hours per week, if during this time no one could shelter themselves under intellectual or organizational specializations so as to reserve for themselves work that would no doubt be more absorbing, but [also] considered as more elegant! And the only work that has ever been considered as elegant has been that which consists in organizing the work of others’ (letter to Yves Le Manach, 4 November 1973, Notbored webpage, http://www.notbored.org/debord-4November-1973.html, consulted 18 March 2014). The implication here, I think, is that Debord accepts that some labour would still be required to be undertaken in a post-spectacular society.

14. To quote Vaneigem: ‘The councils will experiment with attractive forms of carrying out necessary tasks, not in order to hide their unpleasant aspects, but in order to compensate for such unpleasantness with a playful organization of it, and as far as possible to eliminate such tasks in favor of creativity (in accordance with the principle: “Work no, pleasure yes”)’ (Knabb, 2006: 369–370). Here, Vaneigem utilizes – in his own way – Fourier’s theory of ‘attractive labour’ (discussed later): namely, Fourier’s idea that a playful organization of work can make this activity pleasurable. Yet Vaneigem does not, I think, imagine that a playful organization of work can transform this activity into genuine play.


17. André Breton, in his 1935 speech to the Congress of Writers, had remarked: “‘Transform the world,” Marx said; “[C]hange life,” Rimbaud said. These two watchwords are one for us’ (Breton, 1972: 241).

18. Constant (Nieuwenhuis) was a member of the SI from 1957 to 1960.

19. COBRA (1948–1951) was composed of various artists based in Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam.

20. Although the remarks that I quote by Constant concerning Huizinga and play are from the text ‘New Babylon’, which Constant wrote after he had left the SI, they do, nevertheless, encapsulate the group’s views about Huizinga and Homo Ludens.


22. For further details about the Situationists’ theory of unitary urbanism, see Knabb, (2006: 1–8, 52) and Andreotti and Costa (1996: 80).

23. To quote Riesel – from Internationale situationniste #12: ‘It may be doubted … that it is feasible to immediately dissolve all councilist organizations the very instant the councils first appear, as Pannekoek wished. The councilists should speak as councilists within the council, rather than staging an exemplary dissolution of their organizations only to regroup them on the side and play pressure-group politics in the general assembly. In this way it will be easier and more legitimate for them to combat and denounce the inevitable presence of bureaucrats, spies and ex-scabs who will infiltrate here and there. They will also have to struggle against fake councils or fundamentally reactionary ones (e.g. police councils) which will not fail to appear’ (Knabb, 2006: 361).

24. For a longer version of Bakunin’s letter to Albert Richard dated 1 April 1870, see Lehning (1973: 178–182).

25. For a longer version of Bakunin’s letter to Sergei Nechaev, see Confino (1974: 238–280).

26. It should be noted, nevertheless, that the Situationists appear to have a favourable view of Bakunin’s notion that ‘[t]he passion for destruction is a creative passion, too’ – see Bakunin’s 1842 The Reaction in Germany (cited in Dolgoff, 1980: 56–57). In a text written about the May-June 1968 uprising in
France, the Situationists, when discussing the issue of the spontaneous construction of barricades, inserted the aforementioned idea into their text. To quote the Situationists: ‘At about 9 P.M. [on 10 May 1968 in the Latin Quarter of Paris] the first barricades went up spontaneously. Everyone recognized instantly the reality of their desires in that act. Never had the passion for destruction shown itself to be so creative’ (see Viénet, 1992 [1968]: 32).

27. For accounts that suggest Bakunin expressed an authoritarian or dictatorial conception of secret societies, see Carr (1975) and Kelly (1987).

28. In his Confession to the Tsar, however, Bakunin suggests that ‘to hasten revolutionary preparations in Bohemia [during 1848]’ he attempted to arrange the setting up of a secret society. Following the revolutionary uprising, this ‘secret society … was to grow in strength, expand… [and enlarge] itself’ (Bakunin, 1977: 118–119). Nevertheless, this particular conception of a secret society stands in sharp contrast to Bakunin’s ideas on secret societies outlined elsewhere in his writings – for instance, in his letters to fellow revolutionaries. We should, I think, be sceptical of the ideas set out in the Confession for the following reasons: first, Bakunin wrote his Confession (it appears) in an attempt to improve his conditions of imprisonment in the Peter and Paul Fortress; second, this text was written for the Tsar – one of his arch enemies. It is in those writings that Bakunin intended for fellow revolutionaries, I think, that we are more likely to discover a candid expression of his ideas about secret societies.

29. For Bakunin’s criticism of Nechaev, see Bakunin’s letter to Nechaev dated 2 June 1870 in Confino (1974: 238–280).

30. Although the Situationists are highly critical of Bakunin’s efforts to establish, as well as his ideas about, an avant-garde organization, they maintain, as did Bakunin, that a revolutionary avant-garde should be a specific kind of ‘general staff’ – one that assists the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed and one that does not inflict its revolutionary vision on the population. To quote Bakunin: ‘All that a well-organized [secret] society can do is, first, to play midwife to the revolution by spreading amongst the masses ideas appropriate to the masses’ instincts, and to organize, not the Revolution’s army – for the people must at all times be the army – but a sort of revolutionary general staff made up of committed, energetic and intelligent individuals who are above all else true friends of the people and not presumptuous braggarts, with a capacity for acting as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea and the people’s instincts’ (1868 ‘Programme and Object of the Secret Revolutionary Organization of the International Brethren’, cited in Guerin, 1998: 157). To quote the Situationists: ‘The SI cannot be a massive organization, and it will not even accept disciples, as do the conventional avant-garde groups. At this point in history … the SI can only be a Conspiracy of Equals, a general staff that does not want troops’ (Knabb, 2006: 147–148, emphasis in the original SI text). Now, given that the Situationists – as I have argued – have misinterpreted Bakunin’s ideas about a secret society, then although they think that their conception of an avant-garde organization is unlike that advanced by Bakunin, their ideas about such an organization do, nevertheless, resemble those of Bakunin.


32. Bakunin makes this claim in Statism and Anarchy (Schatz, 1990: appendix A).

33. By the orthodox or classical Marxist conception of the proletariat, I mean Karl Marx’s thought concerning this social class. For Marx, this class comprises industrial workers and labourers (directly and indirectly) involved in the capitalist process of production. For a discussion of Marx’s conception of the proletariat, see Draper (1978: chapter 2).

34. For a discussion of Isou’s concept of youth, see Marcus (1989: 268–271).

35. See Debord’s letters sent to Khayati during 1966 for further details concerning the writing of this pamphlet. Available (consulted 4 May 2014) at: http://www.notbored.org/debord.html

36. For accounts of the views of Marx and Engels on the lumpenproletariat, see Draper (1972), Bovenkerk (1984), Bussard (1987) and Stallybrass (1990).

37. For a discussion of the Situationists’ ideas concerning proletarian rebellion, active nihilism and the attainment of a revolutionary consciousness, see Eagles (2012).

38. For a discussion of Marx’s views about the peasantry, see Draper (1978: chapters 12–14).

39. If we recall that the Situationists laud the millenarian movements of the Middle Ages, many of which involved a rebellion of sections of the peasantry, their lack of enthusiasm for contemporary peasant based
revolt might appear somewhat confusing. However, I think that what the Situationists imply is that an uprising of the peasantry in the Middle Ages, inspired by millenarian doctrines, constituted the most advanced form of revolt at that time.

40. Given that the ‘new proletariat’ is placed at the centre of the struggle against the global spectacle, a tension emerges within Situationist theory. That is to say, a tension between two claims: firstly that the spectacle’s powers of domination and mystification are stronger in the industrially advanced societies; and secondly that the proletariat in the developed societies stands at the centre of the struggle against the global spectacle. I have discussed this issue elsewhere (Eagles, 2012).

41. For a discussion of the material pre-conditions for a Marxian socialist/communist society, see Ticktin (1997).

42. I should add that the Situationists remain attached to a classical Marxist conception of the proletariat in the following sense: they maintain that ‘the workers at the levers of big industry … undoubtedly remain if not the proletariat in its entirety, then its very core; because theirs is unquestionably the key role in ensuring social production, which they can always bring to a halt’ (Debord and Sanguinetti, 2003 [1972]: 48). Also see Vaneigem (1994a [1967]: 276) for a reference to the major subversive potential of ‘the workers responsible for the economy’s key sectors’.

43. For references in Bakunin’s writings to the importance of workers’ struggles to the revolutionary fight of the oppressed against capitalism, see, for example, ‘The policy of the International’ and ‘Geneva’s double strike’ in Cutler (1992: 97–110, 145–150).

44. Marx did not hold an entirely negative view of the lumpenproletariat in regard to its potential to join with the industrial proletariat in a revolutionary uprising against capitalism. ‘The “dangerous class”’, he claims, ‘may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution’ (Marx and Engels, 2002 [1848]: 231). Nevertheless, he adds that ‘its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue’ (2002 [1848]: 231, emphasis added).

45. Concerning the role of the ‘lumpenproletariat’ in the May 1968 uprising in France, for example, the Situationists claim that the blousons noirs – a group of marginalized youths – made a positive contribution to the events through their participation in the street fighting. See Viénet (1992 [1968]: 30, 77).


References


