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The Situationists, Marcuse and the “Great Refusal” of the “Hopeless Cases”: The Socially Marginalized, Rebellion and Revolution

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ABSTRACT
This article looks at two theories—developed (roughly speaking) during the same historical period (largely from the 1950s to the 1970s)—which deal with the issue of the socially marginalized, rebellion and revolution: that of the Situationist International and that of Herbert Marcuse. The article examines both the Situationists’ and Marcuse’s thought as regards the social structure of advanced capitalist society and the prospects for “proletarian” revolution in the United States and Europe. Further, the article compares and contrasts the Situationists’ and Marcuse’s ideas about revolution in the realm of culture. Finally, the article reflects on the relevance of Situationist and Marcusean ideas—concerning the “great refusal” of the “hopeless cases”—in the post-2008 period.

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Introduction
This article looks at two theories—developed (roughly speaking) during the same historical period (largely from the 1950s to the 1970s)—which deal with the issue of the socially marginalized, rebellion and revolution: that of the Situationist International and that of Herbert Marcuse. The article is divided into three sections. In section one, I examine both the Situationists’ and Marcuse’s thought as regards the social structure of advanced capitalist society and the prospects for “proletarian” revolution in the US and Europe. In section two, I compare and contrast their ideas about revolution in the realm of culture. In the third section, I consider the relevance of Situationist and Marcusean ideas—concerning the “great refusal” of the “hopeless cases”—in the post-2008 period.

The “Integrated” Majority and the Rebellion of the Socially Marginalized
Writing during the period from the late 1950s to the 1970s, the Situationists argued that a “new proletariat” had arisen in the post-war industrially advanced capitalist societies. They claimed that these were societies of “the spectacle,” that is, in societies saturated with “images,” in the form of “news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment” (Debord [1967] 1995, para. 6), the commodity-form dominates “lived experience” (Knabb 2006, 167–68). As they put it: “[a]ll that once was directly lived has
become mere representation” (Debord [1967] 1995, para. 1).3 For the Situationists, the “new proletariat” is composed of blue collar labourers, (a large section of) white collar labourers, as well as youth, students and the lumpenproletariat.4 Furthermore, they claimed—as we shall see—that this “new proletariat” is only tenuously integrated into “spectacular” society.

Herbert Marcuse, a thinker associated with the Frankfurt School,5 argued that a majority of the proletariat (in the industrially advanced societies) had become deeply integrated into the consumer-capitalist system (see Marcuse [1964] 1999). Moreover, he argued that revolutionary “artistic” and “political” dissent is constantly in danger of being “swallowed up” ([1965] 1969, 102) such that, if incorporated, it serves to support the existing system ([1965] 1969; [1964] 1999, 56–83). Like Marcuse, the Situationists also argued that capitalism can, through the process of commodification, “recuperate” radical ideas, and that radical criticism, if assimilated, acts to strengthen consumer-capitalism. Yet, while the Situationists claimed that the proletariat—which, for them, includes various marginalized groups (see below) that Marcuse located outside of this class—is highly likely to rise in rebellion against this system, Marcuse was—throughout a large part of his oeuvre—pessimistic about the revolutionary potential of the proletariat.6

Marcuse argued that if there was hope for the emergence of a genuinely revolutionary opposition, such a movement would arise among oppressed minorities and individuals located outside of the “conservative majority” (Marcuse [1969] 1973, 68–73)—for instance, students, artists, sexual radicals and ethnic minority groupings.7 Given that, for Marcuse, “[t]he semi-democratic process . . . [of advanced capitalist society] produces and sustains a popular majority whose opinion is generated by the dominant interests in the status quo” ([1969] 1973, 69; italics in the original), and given that oppressed minorities “exist outside the democratic process” ([1964] 1999, 256), “it makes sense,” he suggests, “to say that the general will is always wrong—wrong inasmuch as it objectively counteracts the possible transformation of society into more humane ways of life” ([1969] 1973, 69). “[T]he majority,” he claims, “is no longer justified in claiming the democratic title of the best guardian of the common interest” ([1965] 1969, 132).

In contrast to Marcuse, the Situationists suggest that the vast majority in society, which they consider a “new proletariat” (consisting of marginalized groups and worker-consumers—see below), can offer resistance to capitalism. The proletariat’s dissatisfaction with consumer-capitalism, they claim, can be seen through (various forms of) rebellion arising inside the workplace but outside the mainstream labour organizations—such as wildcat strikes—as well as revolt that takes place in the realm of “leisure”—for instance, juvenile delinquency. For the Situationists, then, the integration of the proletariat into this system is extremely tenuous; it may be reversed at any moment.

That said, the Situationists, in an article entitled “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy” (Knabb 2006),8 which addresses the issue of revolutionary prospects in the United States, offered an analysis of US society and the US proletariat that, when compared with their general assessment of the prospects for revolution in industrially developed societies, to some extent parallels that of Marcuse. In short, the Situationists suggest that the rebellion in the Watts district of Los Angeles during 1965, which saw “real desires begin to be expressed in festive celebration, in playful self-assertion, in the potlatch of destruction” (Knabb 2006, 197; italics in the original), revealed that “[i]n the United States today the whites are enslaved to the commodity while the
blacks are negating it” (2006, 200). Consequently, if a majority of the proletariat were to overturn the spectacle in the United States, then the white section of the working class would need to follow the mutinous example of the black proletariat. Failing this, the Situationists pessimistically predict, “black nationalist tendencies will be reinforced, leading to the futile interethnic antagonism so characteristic of the old society” (2006, 200). “[T]he other possible outcome,” they suggest, would be “[a] phase of mutual slaughter” (1989, 158).

On my reading, the Situationists, when analysing US society, tread a tightrope between two differing perspectives. First, the view that the “proletariat” (which constitutes the majority of the population) is the universal class, “a class which is the dissolution of all classes” (Marx 1992, 256; also see Debord [1967] 1995, para. 114). This class, which is alienated in the spheres of production and consumption, is, the Situationists claim, highly likely to rise up and overturn the spectacle. Second, the view that as the majority of the proletariat has become deeply integrated into the system, the potential for resistance to modern capitalism lies instead with oppressed minority groups. The latter perspective, of course, bears a distinct resemblance to Marcuse’s analysis of advanced industrial society.

So, the Situationists had a somewhat different evaluation of the prospects for proletarian revolution in the United States compared with that in Western Europe. Although optimistic about the Western European proletariat, they were ambivalent about the proletariat in the United States. Just how optimistic the Situationists were as regards the “new proletariat” in Europe can be gauged from their comments about the May 1968 uprising of students and workers in France. Characterizing this as “a festival, a game, a real presence of people and of time” (Knabb 2006, 289), they claim that it involved “the first wildcat general strike in history” (288; italics in the original) and brought forth “the increasingly complete collapse of state power for nearly two weeks” (288).

Marcuse also, at times, appeared to offer a different assessment of the potential for revolutionary change in European societies compared with that in the US. Concerning the May 1968 events in France, he remarked that, unlike in the United States where a deep division existed between the integrated majority and the “outcasts and outsiders” (Marcuse [1964] 1999, 256) (such as ethnic minorities and student militants),

[a] community of “real interest” between the students and the workers . . . did realize itself in political action on a rather large scale during the May rebellion in France . . . and the common action was initiated by the students, not by the workers. ([1969] 1973, 63)

Now, what I think can be said about the thought of the Situationists as well as that of Marcuse regarding the “proletariat” and various rebellions of the marginalized and worker-consumers, is the following: Marcuse’s writings are, for the most part, pessimistic concerning the prospects for a majority of the population to rebel against reification, while those of the Situationists are pervaded by optimism. Furthermore, if we leave to one side the issue of the similarities (and differences) between the Situationists’ and Marcuse’s views concerning the ways in which consumer-capitalism (in the realm of “leisure”) acts to manipulate the instincts of people and subject them to an intensified mystification, what I think we can say a fortiori about this distinction between Marcuse’s despondency and the more hopeful or optimistic outlook of the Situationists, is that it stems, in part, from their differing views about the nature of “white collar” or intellectual labour.
The new industries that emerged after World War II required large numbers of white collar employees: this gave rise to an altered social stratification in advanced industrial societies. Marcuse argues in *One Dimensional Man* that “[t]o Marx, the proletarian is primarily the manual laborer who expends and exhausts his physical energy in the work process” (Marcuse [1964] 1999, 24); further, he suggests that “the ever-more-complete mechanization of labor in advanced capitalism, while sustaining exploitation, modifies the attitude and the status of the exploited” (25). “The new technological work-world,” he maintains, “thus enforces a weakening of the negative position of the working class: the latter no longer appears to be the living contradiction to the established society” (31). “[T]he people,” he claims, “previously the ferment of social change, have ‘moved up’ to become the ferment of social cohesion” (256). Marcuse did, however, following the 1968 May-June rebellion in France, attempt—albeit belatedly—to nuance his assessment of white collar labour.

Vincent Geoghegan, in *Reason and Eros: The Social Theory of Herbert Marcuse*, offers a lucid summary of Marcuse’s views on the technical intelligentsia:

[Marcuse] argued, in the light of his *One-Dimensional Man* strictures on technology, that the technical intelligentsia invariably conceived of revolution as technocratic revolution—which was essentially the mere streamlining of oppression. In *An Essay on Liberation* where the latter argument was repeated and salvation seen in terms of the productive process being determined by groups “with needs and goals very different from those of the technocrats,” the surprise of the May–June events intruded in the form of a footnote: “The existence of such groups among the highly qualified technical personnel was demonstrated during the May–June rebellion in France.” (Geoghegan 1981, 93)

Following the failure of the May–June rebellion to overturn the old order completely, Marcuse returned to a pessimistic stance: post-68 he did not (it appears) think that white collar workers have the ability to resist reification such that a lasting revolutionary transformation could be achieved.10

Now, the Situationists claim 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” (Debord [1967] 1995, para. 114). In other words, the Situationists suggest, unlike Marcuse, that the new white collar occupations are more conspicuously degrading than the bureaucratic or intellectual professions of bourgeois society in its earlier phases of development. Moreover, this implies that these new white collar workers, whom Marcuse thought had—in a sense—“moved up” in society and succumbed to the process of reification, cannot become deeply integrated into consumer-capitalism since this white collar labour is not something which can reify their humanity—that is to say, their emotions and thoughts. To put this another way, the Situationists believed, I think, that the new white collar workers (like blue collar workers) have a “minimal consciousness of alienation”,11 this slight awareness that their lives have become dominated by the commodity-form means that they possess the ability to develop a critique of the entirety of capitalist society—that is, attain a revolutionary consciousness.

Marcuse and the Situationists do, however, both regard students as a social group that has revolutionary potential.12 Yet, whereas the Situationists argue that students are actually a part of a “new proletariat,”13 a class which “is tending to encompass virtually everybody” (Knabb 2006, 111), Marcuse does not include students within the “proletariat” but rather suggests that “a considerable part of the student population is prospective working
class—‘new working class,’ not only not expendable, but vital for the growth of the existing society” (Marcuse [1969] 1973, 64; emphasis added). For Marcuse ([1969] 1973, 65), “the student movement is not a revolutionary force, perhaps not even an avant-garde so long as there are no masses capable and willing to follow.” Yet, Marcuse ([1969] 1973, 63) did identify a social upheaval where a “community of ‘real interest’ between the students and the workers [was actualized]”: the events of May 1968 in France.

Nevertheless, Marcuse argues, for the most part in his writings, that it is “in active minorities, mainly among the young middle-class intelligentsia, and among the ghetto populations” (Marcuse [1969] 1973, 57) that a militant opposition to capitalism is condensed or clustered. As regards the “ghetto populations,” although the Situationists—as we saw above—present an analysis of the 1965 Watts riots that appears ambivalent, they do include the “lumpenproletariat” as a part of the (broadly conceived) “new proletariat.” Moreover, they enthusiastically laud various kinds of “lumpenproletarian” rebellion—for instance, that of juvenile delinquents and urban rioters—and suggest that these are examples of proletarian rebellion. Marcuse, although also seeing hope in the militancy of the “ghetto” underprivileged in advanced industrial societies, claims that this oppressed minority—and this also holds for the student opposition—is not “replacing the proletariat as the revolutionary class”(57) but rather acting as “the [catalyst] of transformation . . . ‘from without’”(60)—that is, outside of “the basic force of transformation, the working class, [which] in the period of stabilization, assumes a stabilizing, conservative function” (60).

In other words, the Situationists re-conceptualize Marx’s notion of the proletariat as a class that, in modern capitalist society, constitutes blue collar labour and (a large part of) white collar labour, as well as students, youth, and the lumpenproletariat. Marcuse, however, re-conceptualizes Marx’s proletariat, it appears, as follows: this class constitutes blue collar labour as well as “an instrumentalist intelligentsia” (Marcuse [1969] 1973, 60)—that is, white collar workers which he terms (although he puts this in scare quotes) “new working class” (60).

From this comparison of Marcuse’s analysis of revolutionary prospects in the United States with that of the Situationists we can discern the following: whereas the Situationists’ optimism, generally expressed throughout their oeuvre, becomes hesitant in relation to the United States, Marcuse’s deep pessimism comes to the fore. Given that the Situationists identified an entrenched division between the integrated white proletariat and groups such as marginalized African Americans and militant students, they became, I think, tentative vis-à-vis the United States with their claim—which they made for all industrially advanced societies—that “proletarian revolution,” involving worker-consumers and socially marginalized groups, is highly likely to take place. Marcuse, however, argued that in conditions of stable advanced capitalism it is highly unlikely that a “proletarian” revolution would arise in the United States given that there is a wide gulf between the deeply integrated workers and the militant “active minorities.”

Yet, when it comes to the issue of proletarian revolution in Europe, Marcuse’s ambivalence stands in contrast to the Situationists’ firmly held belief that the European “new proletariat,” which they considered to be only tenuously integrated into spectacular society, is either currently engaged in, or on the cusp of, a rebellion that will overturn modern capitalism.
Now, the view within the Situationists’ thought that came to predominate was that the “new proletariat”—a class which comprises worker-consumers as well as various marginalized social groups—is the universal class. The alternative perspective—which resembles that of Marcuse—envisions resistance to modern capitalism coming from the “outside,” that is, from marginalized groups and not from the “conservative majority.” The latter view, which the Situationists appear to advance at times in their writings about the United States and the prospects for revolution in that society, would, I think, have greatly destabilized Situationist theory. In other words, if the central claims of Situationist theory, that is to say, (1) that modern capitalist society, compared with capitalist society prior to its emergence as “the spectacle,” has stronger powers of domination and mystification, and (2) that proletarian revolution is highly likely to take place against spectacular society, are not to pull the theory apart, then the various potential opponents to the spectacle that the Situationists identify—worker-consumers, youth, students and lumpenproletarians—must all be considered to be part of a tenuously integrated “new proletariat.” That is, a proletariat that is highly likely to subvert the spectacular society, which has powers of mystification that envelop almost all areas of social life, from within.

Like Marcuse, however, the Situationists suggest that modern capitalism can be resisted through provocative “artistic” actions and the creation of “utopian” experiments in living, here and now. Marcuse claimed that the new opposition—that arose in the 1960s—“often takes on . . . weird and clownish forms” ([1969] 1973, 68). As he writes: “In the face of the gruesomely serious totality of institutionalized politics, satire, irony, and laughing provocation become a necessary dimension of the new politics” (68).

Moreover, Marcuse hailed that section of the Hippies in which there was “an inherent political element”—that is, “the appearance . . . of new instinctual needs and values” (Marcuse 1968, 190). The Situationists also acclaimed the rebellion of various marginalized groups which they believed were engaging in a radical “artistic” critique; for instance, they claimed that “[j]uvenile delinquents are the legitimate heirs of Dada” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 164). The Situationists also engaged in provocative actions—utilizing the technique of détournement—in an attempt to divert (through mockery) elements of the spectacular society. By doing this they believed it was possible to reveal that the entirety of modern capitalist society could be subverted. For instance, the Situationists linked together with radical students at Strasbourg University in 1966 to create a playfully confrontational incident. A group of Situationist inspired students “got itself elected . . . to the committee of the left-wing students’ union” (Gray [1974] 1998, 68). These militants then declared “their intention to dissolve the union once and for all” (Gray [1974] 1998, 68) as it was a part of the spectacle.

The Situationists argued that some individuals, “the hopeless cases—those who reject all roles and those who develop a theory and practice of this refusal” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 135), can, to some degree, live life in accordance with their authentic desires immediately (see below). However, they also claimed that, “the fully justified anticipation of a total destruction [of the spectacle] obliges one never to build anything except in the light of the totality” (Knabb 1989, 139). It is to a discussion of this issue of personal emancipation in the writings of the Situationists as well as Marcuse, and how this revolution in the realm of culture links with the “totality” of the revolutionary process, that I shall now turn.
The “Great Refusal” and the “Revolution of Everyday Life”

Vaneigem, taking inspiration from Nietzsche, claims that there are “two kinds of nihilism: active and passive” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 178; italics in the original; also see Nietzsche 1968, 9–39). “Passive nihilism,” he suggests, “is an overture to conformism”; it “is counter-revolutionary” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 178–79; italics in the original). “Active nihilism,” on the other hand, “is pre-revolutionary” (179; italics in the original). Regarding the latter form, individuals do not merely observe the breakdown of the existing order, but, rather, act to “[speed] up the process” (179). The Dadaists, Vaneigem claims, were very effective active nihilists; Dada’s central problem, however, was that although it “[contained] the seeds by which nihilism could have been surpassed . . . it just left them to rot” (180). Moreover, “[t]he only modern phenomena comparable to Dada,” he suggests, “are the most savage outbreaks of juvenile delinquency” (181). Such delinquents constitute a section of what Vaneigem terms the “hopeless cases”—that is, those genuine radicals who contest (in one way or another) the capitalist system in the present day (135).

For Vaneigem, “the nihilists” (presumably active nihilists) “[i]n the last reckoning . . . are our only allies” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 182; italics in the original). Furthermore, in Internationale situationniste, no. 9, the Situationists pose the following question: “[i]s the SI an expression of nihilism?” (Knabb 2006, 179). They respond by making the following claims: first, that “[t]he supersession of nihilism is reached by way of the decomposition of the spectacle”; and second, “that everywhere in consumer society wastelands of spontaneous collapse are offering a terrain of experimentation for new values” (Knabb 2006, 179). It is clear that the Situationists desire to transcend the condition of nihilism. Moreover, the latter claim relates to the issue of personal emancipation as it implies that some individuals—“the hopeless cases . . . who reject all roles” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 135)—are able, to some extent, to live life authentically here and now. The Situationists do, however, go on to suggest that “[w]e can build only on the ruins of the spectacle” (Knabb 2006, 179). This is because modern capitalism has, via the process of commodification, the power to “recuperate” or capture radical opposition, and, if absorbed, “radical criticism” serves to strengthen consumer-capitalist society.

The Situationists, then, seek to reconcile the idea that some individuals can—to some degree—live in accordance with their real desires immediately, with the idea that an extended experiment in authentic living for all can be constructed following the overthrow of spectacular society. It is within “wastelands of spontaneous collapse,” which constitute (it seems) areas of social life within which the spectacle’s powers of domination and mystification have momentarily disintegrated, that transient experiments in alternative ways of living can be created. However, these ventures must be devised in such a way that they point towards the liberation of the entire surrounding society from “spectacular domination.”

Authentically created situations are, the Situationists suggest, “ephemeral, without a future. Passageways” (Knabb 2006, 41). Such consciously “constructed situations” are, in part, urban surroundings playfully structured to act as pathways to empower individuals to attain a genuine realization of their (changing) desires. The Situationists appear to claim, then, that although situations are fleeting or short-lived, they can nevertheless become prolonged in the post-spectacular society. That is to say, they argue that in a post-capitalist environment a society could be established within which all individuals
could achieve authentic self-realization through the continuous construction of situations. Of course, the Situationists insist that individuals experimenting with different ways of living here and now must, if they seek to subvert the entire spectacle, concern themselves with how their experimental “art” in the realm of the “everyday” relates to the totality of the revolutionary struggle. But why would a small number of individuals—the “hopeless cases”—who construct authentic situations be concerned with the issue of subverting spectacular society in its entirety?

Before addressing this question, I would like to make explicit what I think is implicit in Vaneigem’s reference—in The Revolution of Everyday Life ([1967] 1994)—to the “hopeless cases.” Vaneigem divides this category of individuals into two groups: (1) “those who reject all roles,” and (2) those who turn away from or cast off all reified roles but, in addition, “develop a theory and practice of this refusal” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 135; emphasis added). What Vaneigem appears to be suggesting is the following: the former group has not yet attained an advanced revolutionary consciousness, while the latter group has done so (for instance, those who became members of the Situationist International). If this is right, then the “hopeless cases” are, in some respects, similar to Marcuse’s “outsiders”—a category which Marcuse also divided into (1) “[the opposition] found in the ghettos among the ‘underprivileged,’ whose vital needs even highly developed, advanced capitalism cannot and will not gratify,” and (2) “the opposition . . . concentrated at the opposite pole of society, among those of the privileged whose consciousness and instincts break through or escape social control” (Marcuse 1970, 84).

Indeed, looked at one way Vaneigem’s “hopeless cases” can be considered to be a minority within spectacular society. Of course, another way of looking at the “hopeless cases” is to see this group as becoming the majority in society, that is, when a majority of proletarians reject all roles and the spectacle disintegrates—something that happened, the Situationists claim, during the May-June 1968 rebellion in France. Nevertheless, even if we accept this latter proposition, the following issue still remains: why would those “hopeless cases” who—to some degree—live an authentic life in the present-day want to unify their (current) personal emancipation with the struggle of the majority of proletarians?

The Situationists claim that those “hopeless cases” who, here and now, reject all alienated roles, are able to live life in an authentic manner merely in accordance with “the lesser, everyday pleasures of love, iconoclasm and obedience to the dictates of passion” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 277). A “complete self-realisation” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 246), however, can only be attained through a revolution against the entirety of the spectacle: a revolution that unifies the personal emancipation of each “hopeless” individual with the broader revolutionary struggle of the proletarian class. In other words, the Situationists accept Marx’s notion that individuals can only overcome alienation from their “species-being”—from making full use of humankind’s technology and productive powers—in a post-capitalist environment. For instance, René Viénet (a member of the SI from 1963–71) remarks, in relation to the 1968 rebellion in France, “the real individual was absorbing the abstract citizen into his life, his work, and his individual relationships, becoming a “species-being” and thereby recognizing his own powers as social powers” (Viénet [1968] 1992, 76).

Moreover, I think that the Situationists, utilizing—in their own way—the thought of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier, assume that all (proletarian) individuals, provided they
have attained a highly developed revolutionary consciousness, desire complete self-realization (that is to say, wish to unify personal emancipation with social revolution) since this would allow everyone—through humankind’s use of all its available productive power and technology—to experience “an immediate rise in the pleasure of living” (Knapp 2006, 365; italics in the original). In other words, the individual could not achieve complete self-realization by living life merely in accordance with the “lesser, everyday pleasures” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 277). Rather, it requires that all the latest technology be deployed to permit a qualitative enhancement of this pleasure for all. Furthermore, they assume that the social revolutionary process, which can enable the “hopeless cases” to attain full self-realization, will itself be pleasurable—a joyous revolution in which “[p]lay is the ultimate principle of this festival” (Knapp 2006, 429; italics in the original).

Like the Situationists, Marcuse argues that those individuals who engage in what he terms the “great refusal,” that is, those “outcasts and outsiders” whose “opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not” (Marcuse [1964] 1999, 256), as well as militants who attempt to liberate humankind’s imagination in the present-day and live life in accordance with “new instinctual needs and values” (1968, 190), generate a revolution in the realm of culture. Although Marcuse suggests that one part of the 1960s Hippy movement—that which had been defused by the “repressive tolerance” of modern capitalism (See Marcuse ([1965] 1969)—was “mere masquerade and clownery on the private level” (1968, 190), another “political” section of the Hippies had developed a “new sensibility, which [expressed] the ascent of the life instincts over aggressiveness and guilt,” ([1969] 1973, 31). As he writes:

At least this part of the Hippies, in which sexual, moral and political rebellion are somehow united, is indeed a non-aggressive form of life: a demonstration of an aggressive non-aggressiveness which achieves, at least potentially, the demonstration of qualitatively different values . . . (1968, 190)

Here Marcuse suggests that this section of the Hippie movement was tending to live in accordance with values qualitatively different from those of—what Freud termed—the “reality principle.”

In Eros and Civilization (published in 1955) Marcuse argued, against Freud, that the reality principle is something historically specific, and that the form it takes in modern capitalist society is that of the “performance principle” (Marcuse [1955] 1987, 35). Marcuse also amended Freud’s concept of repression, suggesting that a distinction can be made between “basic repression” and “surplus repression”: the former refers to “the ‘modifications’ of the instincts necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in civilization” (35), while the latter refers to “the restrictions necessitated by social domination” (35). This “surplus,” then, concerns the repression needed to ensure the perpetuation of a particular form of society.

Marcuse also expressed his admiration for the “great refusal” of the Surrealists. “The surrealists,” he writes, “recognized the revolutionary implications of Freud’s discoveries . . . But . . . they went beyond psychoanalysis in demanding that the dream be made into reality without compromising its content” (Marcuse [1955] 1987, 149). Moreover,

[1]his Great Refusal is the protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom—“to live without anxiety.” But this idea could be formulated without
punishment only in the language of art. In the more realistic context of political theory and even philosophy, it was almost universally defamed as utopia. ([1955] 1987, 149–50)

Yet, with the onset of the 1968 revolutionary events in France, Marcuse claimed that “[t]he new sensibility has become a political force.” “The graffiti of the ‘jeunesse en colère,’” he remarked,

joined Karl Marx and André Breton: the slogan “l’imagination au pouvoir” went well with “les comités (soviets) partout”; the piano with the jazz player stood well between the barricades . . . ([1969] 1973, 30)


Like Marcuse, the Situationists imply that as technology can largely replace (and is more and more lessening the physical burden of) human labour, the repression—in capitalist society—of human erotic desire beyond its sublimation through that labour which remains to be undertaken to ensure humankind’s continued existence in civilization, is surplus repression.24 Furthermore, like Marcuse, the Situationists argue that the “hopeless cases” seek a “thorough-going fusion of reason and passion” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 236). However, the Situationists’ conception of this “fusion” differs to an extent, I think, from the “sensuous rationality” outlined by Marcuse.

Debord, arguing against the Surrealists (see below), makes the assumption “that the unconscious imagination is poor” (Knabb 2006, 28). From this, we could suppose that the Situationists hold to a belief that the creative, imaginative side to human beings requires, alongside the drives of the unconscious, the interference of the rational, conscious side of the mind if it is to be enhanced or improved. Put another way, for the Situationists the imagination—which, for Freud, signifies the emergence of the unconscious into the realm of human consciousness—needs, if it is to become fully creative, the intervention of reason in such a way that reason becomes the dominant partner in the
relationship between the unconscious and conscious sides of the mind (see below). The Situationists imply, then, that a distinction can be made between the modest or meagre creativity of humans guided by the drives of the unconscious, and the heightened creativity, which can arise when unconscious desires are steered by a new reality principle—a form of reason which differs radically from the repressive rationality prevalent in modern capitalist society.

For the Situationists, the imagination—which involves the participation of the unconscious—can flourish, it seems, provided it is, so to speak, refracted through the prism of a new “dominant” rationality. In other words, what the Situationists allude to in their outline of a new rationality is that although passion has to be liberated, it must nevertheless be supervised by reason. Yet this does not appear to be a form of reason that, as Marcuse ([1955] 1987, 224) suggests, arises as “Eros redefines reason in his own terms.” Rather, the Situationists, I suggest, imagine that a new reality-principle would be one that sees reason steer or direct liberated passion, since they appear to believe that liberated unconscious desire, if not kept in check by a “dominant” rationality, will bring forth a condition of chaos and (social) breakdown.

Through developing a critical appraisal of the Surrealists’ understanding of the unconscious, Debord, in a sense, came to share Freud’s belief that the liberation of unconscious desires, without rational control of these desires, would lead to rack and ruin. As Debord writes:

> The discovery of the role of the unconscious was indeed a surprise and an innovation; but it was not a law of future surprises and innovations. Freud had also ended up discovering this when he wrote: “Whatever is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once it is freed, it too falls to ruin.” (Knabb 2006, 29)

That the Situationists accept Freud’s findings about the unconscious mind there is no doubt. As they write:

> [T]he discoveries of psychoanalysis are in fact a weapon—as yet unused due to obvious socio-political reasons—for a rational critique of the world. Psychoanalysis profoundly ferrets out the unconscious, its poverty and its miserable repressive maneuvers, which only draw their force and their magical grandeur from a quite banal practical repression in daily life. (Knabb 2006, 484)

Thus, the Situationists ascribe to psychoanalysis a revolutionary role, provided it can become an integral part of a revolutionary praxis. Yet they are critical of the Surrealists’ interpretation and experimental application of Freud’s psychoanalytical ideas. Concerning the Surrealists’ attempts to gain access to the desires of the unconscious through the practice of automatism, Vaneigem ([1977] 1999, 58) claims that: “By and large the practice of automatism, restricted to writing, failed to lead to any analysis of the ego, any uncovering of fantasies or strange drives, or any critique of language as a form of alienation.”

Therefore, if we consider that the Situationists were unimpressed with the Surrealists’ belief in the tremendous creative potential of the unconscious mind, and that they were critical of the Surrealists’ excessive focus on id, then I think that the Situationists remain, in a sense, more attached to Freudian orthodoxy than the Surrealists. The Situationists’ assumption that unconscious desire is chaotic and unruly, and their belief that the unconscious emotions of individuals require the intervention of the conscious side of the mind in
such a way that human passion can be kept in check and given a sense of order (albeit by a new form of reason), places them closer to Freud when compared with the Surrealists.

The Situationists were, of course, profoundly influenced by the Surrealist group. Like the Surrealists, the Situationists venerated Arthur Cravan’s “sabotage” undertaken in “the most radioactive zones of the cultural disaster” (Knabb 2006, 140). Cravan, a “poet-boxer” (Kaufmann 2006, 25) and “deserter of seventeen nations” (Debord [1978] 2003, 157), had been associated with Dada and had “carried out . . . all the deeds of anarchy he promised in his writings” (Richter 1978, 85). “[In 1918, Cravan] left the Mexican coast in a little boat to sail across the shark infested Caribbean . . . No trace of him was ever found” (Richter 1978, 86). In his film Howls for Sade, Debord, with a sense of marvel and fascination, praised Cravan for his “whipcracking spirit” (Debord [1978] 2003, 5). Likewise, the Situationists lauded Jacques Vaché—a figure who had captivated André Breton. The Situationists saw Vaché as a pioneer who had “[broken] free of roles by restoring them to the realm of play” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 131). He had been “[a patient at] a military mental hospital”—a place André Breton (who would later lead the Surrealist group) had worked during 1916 (Lewis 1990, 14). Vaché believed “that existence is absurd” (Lewis 1990, 14) and encapsulated his “revolt against society” with “his concept of ‘umour,’ which he defined as ‘a theatrical uselessness (without joy) of everything’” (Lewis 1990, 14). Vaché killed himself “in 1918 by taking an overdose of opium” (Lewis 1990, 14). Debord paid tribute to this restless rebel’s “overwhelming sense of urgency,” yet noted that his “catastrophic haste . . . led him to destroy himself” (Debord [1978] 2003, 5).

To be sure, both the Situationists and Marcuse shared the view that those individuals who contest the repressive reality-principle of capitalist society here and now do so through the activity of genuine (non-commodified) play. Nevertheless, the overall tone of Marcuse’s comments about the playful “great refusal” of the Surrealists is more favourable when compared with those made by the Situationists. Both the Situationists and Marcuse do, however, consider that reason and passion can be reconciled or fused through genuine play. I shall now make a few brief comments about how Marcuse and the Situationists envision this “fusion” in relation to the body and human activity in general.

Marcuse, who acclaimed the sexual experimentation of groups such as the Hippies, argues, in Eros and Civilization, that the performance-principle—the reality-principle that prevails in capitalist society—“[channels] sexuality into monogamic reproduction” (Marcuse [1955] 1987, 199). However, “with the abolition of the surplus-repression necessitated by the performance-principle [the body],” since it would “[n]o longer [be] used as a full time instrument of labor . . . would be resexualized” (201). In other words, in a post-capitalist society with a “non-repressive reality principle,” there would be “a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality and . . . a decline of genital supremacy” (201).

Although the Situationists did not flesh out their ideas vis-à-vis Freud’s theory, they did suggest that “[l]ove offers the purest glimpse of true communication that any of us have had” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 248)—it gives individuals an indication or foretaste of a truly human (non-commodified) life. Moreover, like Marcuse, they argue that individuals can only achieve genuine self-realization when the passion of love extends beyond the narrow realm of human sexual relationships (genital sexuality) to embrace all human relationships (253).
The Situationists argue that in a post-capitalist society where there exists a new reality-principle the scope of the erotic realm would, as individuals engage in authentic play, broaden to embrace almost all human pursuits. In the eroticized “unitary urbanist" post-revolutionary city, the Situationists claim, “[t]he main activity of the inhabitants will be CONTINUOUS DRIFTING” (Knabb 2006, 7; emphasis in the original), and “[t]here will be rooms more conducive to dreams than any drug, and houses where one cannot help but love” (Knabb 2006, 6). Yet in contrast to Marcuse, who argues that “if work were accompanied by a reactivation of pregenital polymorphous eroticism, it would tend to become gratifying in itself without losing its work content” (Marcuse [1955] 1987, 215; italics in the original)—making it pleasurable, playful and aesthetic, the Situationists do not believe, I think, that with a shift away from a dominant genital sexuality and the development of a liberated Eros, that work (an activity undertaken to meet the requirements of self-preservation) would become genuinely playful. Put another way, for Marcuse the scope of the “non-repressive sublimation" of sexual desire in a future society is envisioned to be broader than it is for the Situationists.

Towards the Seizure of the Means of Consumption?

In this final section of the article, I consider the relevance of the Situationists’ and Marcuse’s ideas—discussed previously—post-2008. In the discussion that follows, I shall make some preliminary remarks about how these ideas could be utilized in a context in which “austerity” has been applied throughout the developed capitalist world.

The Situationists—as we saw above—acclaim social outcasts and outlaws such as Arthur Cravan, Jacques Vaché as well as seditious students and urban rioters. Further, they laud Jules Bonnot, who robbed banks, Ravachol, who undertook “propaganda by the deed” by setting off bombs, and delinquents who engage in shoplifting (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 31, 81, 103, 110, 214). “[P]erhaps tactics,” claims Vaneigem, “need scouts driven by individual despair” (31). However, “these tactics will be condemned to theoretical hibernation if they cannot, by other means, attract collectively the individuals whom isolation and hatred for the collective lie have already won over to the rational decision to kill or to kill themselves” (31–32; italics in the original). “Nihilists,” the Situationists declare, “...one more effort if you want to be revolutionaries!” (182; italics in the original)

So, although showing admiration for the rebellion of assorted active nihilists, the Situationists “consider cultural activity, from the standpoint of totality” (Debord, cited from McDonough 2002, 61). In other words, they believe that while it is immediately possible for small numbers of “hopeless” individuals to gratify their “lesser pleasures” and bring forth a unification of art with life here and now, the prolonged development of such experiments in constructing situations requires the complete overturning of the spectacular society—this is the Situationists’ vision of “the revolution of everyday life.”

The Situationists’ celebration of social outcasts as potential or actual revolutionaries suggests that they took inspiration, just as the Surrealists had before them, from Romanticism’s cult “of the bandit as revolutionary”. This cult appears to have its origins in Schiller’s The Robbers published in 1781 (Honour 1979, 241). In this play, Karl Moor is “the tragic hero” (Honour 1979, 241), “who, because he has been wronged becomes the head of a robber gang, and murders and pillages and sets buildings on fire, and in the end surrenders himself to justice and causes himself to be executed” (Berlin 2013, 97).
The heroic bandit exemplified “[t]he Romantic artist[’s] . . . own liberty—his freedom to express his genius” (Honour 1979, 244). The Situationists, however, present an egalitarian vision: they do not believe that only a few men or women of genius can become artists. Rather, they claim that an entire society can be established where “there are no more artists because everyone is an artist,” suggesting that, “[t]he work of art of the future will be the construction of a passionate life” (Vaneigem 1994, 202).

Now, if we consider that Marcuse drew on the ideas of André Breton—as well as those of other Parisian Surrealists—to develop his concept of the “great refusal” of marginalized individuals and groups, then there is, to some extent, an affinity between the “artistic” rebellion of Marcuse’s “outsiders” and that of the Situationists’ “hopeless cases”—that is, provided the “hopeless cases” are conceived as a minority which rejects all roles. The Situationists, as we saw above, likened the rebellion of juvenile delinquents, such as those hooligans who “[i]n December 1956 . . . ran wild in the streets of Stockholm, setting fire to cars, smashing neon signs, tearing down hoardings and looting department stores” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 69), to that of the Dadaists. Moreover, both Marcuse and the Situationists stressed the importance of geography for the revolt of the socially marginalized. The Situationists believed that “hopeless” individuals could undermine the capitalist urban environment by engaging in the dérive, a method that involves walking through the city and consciously registering “the specific effects of the geographical environment . . . on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (Knabb 2006, 52). Such a (playful) technique could, they thought, yield “psycho-geographical” knowledge of a city that would be useful for the purposes of subversion. And Marcuse argued that,

located in the core cities of the . . . [United States], the ghettos form natural geographical centres from which the struggle can be mounted against targets of vital economic and political importance; in this respect, the ghettos can be compared with the faubourgs of Paris in the eighteenth century, and their location makes for spreading and “contagious” upheavals. (Marcuse [1969] 1973, 62; italics in the original)

In more recent times, “geographical centres” of various kinds have acted to facilitate the resistance of socially marginalized groups. For example, the university campus in Greece, a place that has legal protection from police incursion, has served as an organizing hub for anti-capitalist protestors; the impoverished banlieues surrounding cities in France, with their concentration of large numbers of the marginalized, have become a potential focal point for rebellion which might be triggered at any moment—for instance, the large-scale youth uprising in late 2005 initiated by the deaths of two teenagers “whom locals [in Clichy-sous-Bois] think were fleeing police”; the Exarcheia district of Athens, a place where rebellious youths gather and express their dissent through music (for instance, Punk) and through graffiti on the walls, also saw weeks of rioting in December 2008 following the death of Alexandros Grigoropoulos who was shot by the police; the geographically scattered run-down council estates of England, which are in close proximity to “targets of vital economic and political importance,” offered rioters in London and other English cities in August 2011—the majority of whom (it appears) reside in deprived parts of England—easy access to shopping centres, warehouses, police stations and so on; and the “suburban ghetto” of Ferguson (in the US state of Missouri), which has a high proportion of people living in deprived circumstances, saw recurrent protests and
riots after the black teenager Michael Brown was shot dead by the police on 9 August 2014.\textsuperscript{45}

Returning to the issue of student rebellion, we saw earlier that both the Situationists and Marcuse thought that radical students could potentially link their struggle against the “consumer society” with that of other alienated social groups. Although differences can be found between the Situationists’ assessment and that of Marcuse concerning which oppressed social groups students might draw into the fight against capitalism (Marcuse not being entirely consistent in his views about the revolutionary potential of white collar labourers), both do, nevertheless, cite the example of student revolt triggering a rebellion of millions of workers during May 1968 in France. In the years since the banking crisis of 2007–8, student discontent has manifested itself in occupations and demonstrations in a number of developed countries, such as England in 2010 and Canada in 2012.\textsuperscript{46} Although neither of these rebellions ignited a workers’ uprising, the protests were, for a number of months, highly disruptive. Moreover, the student revolt in England saw the participation of marginalized youths from the “inner city”: they protested against the proposed abolition of the pre-university Educational Maintenance Allowance and against the proposed £9000 a year university tuition fees which, they feared, would prevent them from attending university in the future. Here, I think we can see, to some extent, a blurring of the category of students and that of “inner city” youths. Indeed, the beginnings of an alliance or association between militant students and the “inner city” marginalized (who receive the full force of state repression) is arguably developing, to an extent, in accordance with the scenario sketched out by Marcuse as far back as the 1960s.

Both Marcuse and the Situationists were, of course, writing in a context in which the number of university students in the advanced societies was in the hundreds of thousands; “by the late 1980s,” however, “students were counted in millions in France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Spain . . . the USSR . . . and . . . the USA” (Hobsbawm 1994, 295). In the present context, where students number in the millions, the division or gulf between what Marcuse termed “the young militant intelligentsia” and “the ghetto populations” is no longer as pronounced as it was in the 1960s. In recent years we have seen links made between these two groups: following the 2010 student rebellion in England, protests against “austerity”\textsuperscript{47} have seen activists from the Tottenham campaign group “Justice for Mark Duggan” joining together with students to protest against capitalism and police violence,\textsuperscript{48} Duggan having been shot dead by the British police in the inner city Tottenham area of London triggering widespread rioting in August 2011.\textsuperscript{49}

To be sure, the policy of austerity, pursued by governments throughout the developed world in the wake of the 2008 banking crash, has created a situation in which the standard of living of socially marginalized groups and that of the “integrated” majority has stagnated or begun to decline. In this regard, the Situationists believed that it was possible for the struggles of radical students to be linked with those of the “lumpenproletariat,” and that these groups could align their militancy with that of blue and white collar labourers. Writing at the height of the post-war economic boom in the late 1960s, they argued that the struggles of the “new proletariat” would be directed against “a well-functioning capitalist economy” (Viénet [1968] 1992, 121; italics in the original). Of course, this notion that the capitalist system, post 2008, has a thriving economy which allows for the vast majority to live as affluent worker-consumers (with a standard of living equivalent to that of the vast majority during the post-war “golden age”\textsuperscript{50}) is not currently pertinent.
Nevertheless, the Situationists did, in the early 1970s, claim that “the old form of plain economic crisis that the system had succeeded in overcoming during the . . . [post-war] period . . . has resurfaced as a possibility for the near future” (Debord and Sanguinetti [1972] 2003, 18–19; italics in the original). Although not a central feature of their theory, this might allow for Situationist theory to be adapted—to an extent—to the new context of austerity. Furthermore, if we consider that Marcuse remarked that “[t]he development of a radical political consciousness among the masses is conceivable only if and when the economic stability and the social cohesion of the system begin to weaken” (Marcuse [1969] 1973, 59), then Marcuse’s thought also offers possibilities for revision in the contemporary context.

Arguably, contemporary society’s power to mystify people is now weaker in the post-2008 era. If consumer-capitalism is indeed in a phase of disintegration and decline, then “revolution” (involving a majority of the population) could become a feature of the socio-political landscape. Yet, this would not be an uprising undertaken by affluent worker-consumers and marginalized groups (as the Situationists imagined this in the 1960s), but, rather, by worker-consumers whose standard of living has worsened together with other marginalized social groups. Put differently, such a revolution might be better contemplated as a rebellion of the majority who have become, post-2008, more marginal to the consumer-capitalist system—such a system becoming skewed more and more towards the “luxury” consumption market.51

With this in mind, let us consider the following issue: if, as Marcuse ([1969] 1973, 20) argues, “[t]he so-called consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism have created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form,” what does this imply vis-à-vis rebellion in a context where the “integrated majority” are no longer able to participate in the consumer system to the extent to which they could prior to the 2008 global banking crash? Put another way, given that Marcuse suggested that “the working class,” during the post-war economic boom, had come to “[share] the stabilizing needs of the system” (25), needs which can be considered to have become “vital needs which, if not satisfied, would cause dysfunction of the organism” (20), then even if a majority of the population were to engage in an uprising would not the “counter-revolution anchored in the instinctual structure” (21) act to thwart the development of a—highly developed—revolutionary consciousness?

Although it did not involve a majority of the population, a large-scale rebellion took place in England during several days in August 2011. During the riots, which occurred in London and other English cities, youths fought the police, burned buildings and looted goods. One way in which we might characterize the uprising is as follows: the widespread looting that took place could be seen as indicating that the individuals involved have internalized the system’s “stabilizing needs,” but (in a “neoliberal” world) are unable to participate meaningfully in the consumerist system given their marginal status (being on the fringes of work, excluded from the labour market and so on). Yet, even if a majority of those involved wished to become integrated into the “consumer society” as (atomized) individual consumers, the collective revolt of such individuals—if we assume that the rebellion was mainly undertaken by people from a deprived socio-economic background (see footnote 43)—revealed through its confrontational and violent character, I think, that the material interests of this marginalized social group52 are fundamentally in opposition to those of the bourgeoisie—the ruling class which presides over the system of consumer-
capitalism. To explore this further, let us return to what Marcuse as well as the Situationists had to say about false needs and desires.

Rather like Marcuse, the Situationists argued that spectacular society requires the generation of false needs and desires (See Debord [1967] 1995, para. 51; Knabb 2006, 429; Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 223). Yet, unlike Marcuse, the Situationists argued that proletarians (both affluent worker-consumers and marginalized individuals/groups) could, at any moment, subvert the false pleasures of the spectacle—through the technique of détournement—and transform them into genuine pleasures. In other words, the Situationists believed that the proletariat is only tenuously integrated into capitalist society; it is a class that, in circumstances of consumer affluence, possesses the ability to throw off its consumerist chains. Moreover, Debord—writing in the 1960s—suggested that the revolt of the young, which “[embodied] a rejection of the specialized sphere of the old politics, as well as of art and everyday life,” along with the radical “anti-union struggles of Western workers” were “both portents of a second proletarian onslaught on class society” (Debord [1967] 1995, para. 115). Furthermore, he likened this new “onslaught” to the Luddite rebellion of textile workers who smashed the weaving machines in nineteenth century England. Yet, in the spectacular society this would be “an onslaught on the machinery of permitted consumption” (para. 115; italics in the original).

The riots in English cities in August 2011 could be viewed as just such an assault on the “machinery of permitted consumption.” In this rebellion of marginalized youths, shopping centres were looted, shops (mainly chain stores) burned, mainstream television crews attacked (such as Sky and the BBC), and—in North London—a (Sony) warehouse distribution centre was torched. However, when it comes to the specific issue of looting, things become more complicated: the goods taken range from food and alcohol to electronic equipment—hi-fis, mobile phones, computers, flat screen TVs and so on—to items of clothing, often from particular chain stores. Looked at one way, the looting of items such as television sets (if these are then used to watch mainstream TV channels or indeed taken to be sold) as well as sports gear from stores such as JD Sports, which sell clothes promoted by pro-capitalist gangsta rappers, could be viewed as examples of individuals succumbing to, as Marcuse ([1969] 1973, 21) put it, “the counter-revolution anchored in the instinctual structure.” In other words, such individuals, although in rebellion, had not yet developed new needs and values. In this connection, the Situationists, although not as pessimistic as Marcuse regarding the possibility that the oppressed could develop new values, nevertheless remarked that the looting in the Watts area of Los Angeles in 1965 “[embodied] the most direct realization of the distorted principle, ‘To each according to his false needs’—needs determined and produced by the economic system that the very act of looting rejects” (Knabb 1989, 155). Can we then consider that the rioters in London and other cities in England in 2011 were still enchained to “false needs”?

Here, another question can be raised: could the looting, particularly of the most technologically advanced goods, be seen, in part, as the rioters searching, albeit unconsciously, for a way to overcome their alienation from what Marx termed “species-being”? If, as Marx thought, humans are alienated when they lack direct access to all the latest technology and productive power in society, then the following could be suggested: the marginalized who rioted in English cities and (in the main) looted high tech goods were, although they lacked an awareness of their actions, attempting in a distorted manner to transcend—through playful activity—the circumstances which perpetuate the alienation of humans...
from their “species-being.” Given that items such as personal computers and mobile phones—which were prominent among the looted goods—have a multifaceted usage, it could be argued that the rioters, through breaking into shops and looting seemingly “consumer” goods, in a sense (partially) seized control of the “new” means of consumption/production. PCs, mobile phones and tablets, when combined with the appropriate software, are now used as a means of production, that is, for the purposes of “work”—to design such things as buildings, to make films, music and so on—as well as a means of consumption, that is, for the purposes of “leisure”—to watch films, play music, computer games and so on. Of course, it is one thing to achieve a partial seizure of the “new” means of production/consumption and quite another to “seize” ownership of high-tech corporations such as Microsoft and Apple.

To be sure, the Situationists claimed that “[p]roletarian revolutions will be festivals or nothing, for festivity is the very keynote of the life they announce” (Knabb 2006, 429). That the riots in England in 2011 had a festive air about them can be gauged from various accounts of the events given by immediate observers as well as by participants themselves. In the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) study The August Riots in England (2011), which was “prepared for the cabinet office,” the following comment is made about the interviews that its researchers conducted with individual participants in the riots:

In some instances, the events were described in terms of a wild party or, as one young person put it, “like a rave.” A sense of glee pervaded these accounts—people were often grinning while describing their experience—a delight that the normal order of things was briefly turned upside down. (Morrell et al. 2011, 31)

Furthermore, a “young person” from Birmingham—who was interviewed for the study—made the following remark:

We was just bored really and obviously nothing like this has ever happened for however long we have been alive. It was a first really, and we decided just to go up there just so we can say we had been there, not to act cool or anything, just to say, it is so big, it will probably be put in history, so we decided to go up there. We were that bored. (Morrell et al. 2011, 31)

Again, the Situationists’ assessment of the rebellion of the “hopeless cases” resonates here in terms of this participant’s understanding of the uprising as an event directed against boredom. “Who wants a world in which the guarantee that we shall not die of starvation entails the risk of dying of boredom?” asks Vaneigem ([1967] 1994, 18). “Boredom,” the Situationists declare, “is counterrevolutionary” (Knabb 2006, 112; italics in the original). “We have a world of pleasures to win, and nothing to lose but boredom” (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 279) Put another way, consumer-capitalism reproduces itself, in part, by harnessing the (proletarian) individual’s real erotic desires in such a way that the individual experiences “pseudo-gratification” (Debord [1967] 1995, para. 59). In other words, it thwarts genuine self-realization given that it represses real desires by deflecting or redirecting them towards the spectacle’s reified goods and stereotypical roles. It is because real pleasurable desires are subjected to this form of repression, that individuals experience their lives in modern capitalist society as unfulfilled, as pervaded by boredom.

However, another individual involved in the riots, identified in the above-mentioned study as a “young person” from Peckham, recounted that:
[I felt] excited, adrenaline, scared, but a good scared, like: “Wow, wow, wow, is this happening?” And the bin on fire was wow. It was a new experience. [I] think it was for everyone. People were excited, especially getting PS3 boxes. (Morrell et al. 2011, 31)

Encapsulated in this account is the issue of whether the marginalized “hopeless cases,” through their “great refusal,” can attain new needs and values or whether they remain enchained to the “false needs” generated by consumer-capitalist society. Should it be the latter, then—for contemporary social theory, which makes use of (unorthodox) Marxist and Freudian ideas—this raises the issue of the need for a revolutionary avant-garde. That is to say, the need for some kind of (avant-garde) intervention to assist such “hopeless” individuals, as well as “integrated” worker-consumers, to overcome humankind’s condition of alienation in advanced capitalist society. But this is a topic that will have to be discussed on another occasion.

Notes

1. The Situationist International (SI) was created in 1957 and disbanded in 1972. The group—based in Paris—was made up of “artists” who had been involved with various European avant-garde artistic organizations; the group published 12 issues of the magazine Internationale situationniste. The SI’s two key theorists were Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. Debord’s (1967) La société du spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle) and Vaneigem’s (1967) Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations (The Revolution of Everyday Life) appeared a few months before the outbreak of the May events of 1968 in France—events which saw students occupy universities, workers occupy factories, widespread rioting, a general strike and the construction of barricades in the centre of Paris.


3. For further details about the concept of “the spectacle,” see Eagles (2012).


5. The Frankfurt School emerged from the Institute for Social Research established at Frankfurt University in the 1920s. The institute relocated to the US around the time the Nazis assumed power in Germany. Marcuse remained in America throughout the war and into the post-war period; he continued to make a contribution to “critical theory” up until his death in 1979.

6. Note that Marcuse does qualify his view concerning the working class in the less developed capitalist countries. For instance, he remarks that “. . . where the consumer gap is still wide, where the capitalist culture has not yet reached into every house or hut, the system of stabilizing needs has its limits; the glaring contrast between the privileged class and the exploited leads to a radicalization of the underprivileged. This is the case of the ghetto population and the unemployed in the United States; this is also the case of the labouring classes in the more backward capitalist countries” ([1969] 1973, 25).

7. To quote Marcuse: “. . . underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system . . . ” ([1964] 1999, 256). Also, see Marcuse ([1969] 1973, 55–81).

8. In this article, the Situationists made clear their support for those who rioted in the Watts area of Los Angeles during 1965. As they put it: “[A]ll the ideologists and ‘spokesmen’ of the vacuous international Left, deplored the irresponsibility, the disorder, the looting . . . and the 2000 fires with which the blacks lit up their battle and their ball. But who has defended the Los Angeles rioters in the terms they deserve? We will. Let the economists
fret over the $27 million lost, and the city planners sigh over one of their most beautiful supermarkets gone up in smoke. The role of a revolutionary publication is not only to justify the Los Angeles insurgents, but to help elucidate their perspectives, to explain theoretically the truth for which such practical action expresses the search” (Knabb 2006, 195).

9. To quote Marcuse: “What we can say of the American working class is that in their great majority the workers are integrated into the system and do not want a radical transformation, we probably cannot or not yet say of the European working class” (1970, 85; italics in the original).

10. As Geoghegan recounts: “When asked in a 1973 interview if the events of Paris 1968 had shown the book on one-dimensionality to be over-pessimistic, Marcuse answered: ‘It seems to me that unfortunately what I said in my book has been corroborated. Unfortunately!’” (1981, 94–95).

11. For a discussion of Lukács’s concept of reification—which the Situationists utilized to develop their concept of the spectacle—see Arato and Breines (1979) and what they 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; italics in the original).


13. For further details, see Eagles (2017).

14. For references to the “conservative majority” in Marcuse’s writings see, for instance, Marcuse ([1969] 1973, 73; 1972, 54).

15. For the Situationists, “[d]étournement [is] the reuse of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble” (Knabb 2006, 67). Also see footnote 56.


17. The assumption the Situationists make here is that these individuals actually resist the spectacle. However, the Situationists also argue that these experiments in authentic living are constantly at risk of becoming recuperated.

18. For references to “spectacular domination” in Debord’s writings see, for example, Debord ([1988] 1990, 13, 87).

19. Note that the Situationists add that “[a] situation is also an integrated ensemble of behavior in time” (Knabb 2006, 49).

20. I should add that Ivan Chtcheglov, an early member of the Situationist International and author of the article “Formulary for a New Urbanism,” makes the following remark in a letter (written in 1963 and published in Internationale situationniste, no. 9) to Guy Debord and Michèle Bernstein (also a member of the Situationist group): “I now repudiate my Formulary’s propaganda for a continuous dérive. It could be continuous like the poker game in Las Vegas, but only for a certain period, limited to a weekend for some people, to a week as a good average; a month is really pushing it. In 1953–1954 [when Chtcheglov, Debord and Bernstein were members of the Lettrist avant-garde group] we dérived for three or four months straight. That’s the extreme limit. It’s a miracle it didn’t kill us” (cited in Knabb 2006, 481; italics in the original). Also see footnotes 33 and 40.
21. Once again, the assumption here is that these “hopeless” individuals manage to resist the spectacle’s power of recuperation. Also see footnote 17.

22. For Marx’s exposition of “species-being,” see the “1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” in Early Writings (1992). Also see Wood (1986, chapter 2) for a discussion of this concept.


24. To quote Vaneigem ([1967] 1994, 238): “The guarantee of material security [in post-war consumer-capitalist societies, which are technologically rich and have a welfare state] leaves unused a large supply of energy formerly expended in the struggle for survival.” This “energy”—or put another way, erotic desire—then becomes, in the “spectacular” society, subject to a new form of repression as it is re-channelled in (alienated) roles or through the consumption of consumer goods.

25. Note that Marcuse also remarks that the imagination becomes more creative or “productive” provided consciousness intervenes when pleasurable, unconscious desires are accessed or released. As he writes in An Essay on Liberation: “The imagination becomes productive if it becomes the mediator between sensibility on the one hand, and theoretical as well as practical reason on the other, and in this harmony of faculties . . . guides the reconstruction of society” (Marcuse [1969] 1973, 44). Furthermore, in a letter to the Chicago Surrealists (October 12, 1972), he criticizes the Surrealists’ method of automatism as follows: “The surrealist emphasis on automatism, on the creativity of the unconscious, is fallacious . . . If X starts writing down what ‘comes to him’ automatically, spontaneously, this is a private affair, release of private pains or pleasures, of desires which cannot claim any ‘higher truth.’ Just as there are Ego trips which are without any other than private relevance, so there are Id trips: narcissistic satisfaction. (Besides, I [Marcuse] do not believe that there is such a thing as automatic writing or painting. As soon as writing or painting starts, consciousness interferes with spontaneity—though perhaps in a very devious, unconscious way.)” (Marcuse 2006, 185–86). However, unlike the Situationists, Marcuse does not, I think, believe that with the liberation of erotic desire and the establishment of a new reality principle that consciousness or reason needs to be the dominant partner in a fusion of passion and reason. Also see footnote 31.

26. This quotation comes from Freud’s “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” (the “Rat Man” case history), see Freud (1991, 57).

27. Of course, the Situationists depart from Freud in the following respect: they believe that a new reality-principle—different from that prevailing in modern capitalist society—can be established.

28. I should point out here a key difference between the Surrealists and the Situationists: whereas the Surrealists believed that there should be a separation between an “artistic” and a “political” avant-garde, the Situationists did not. The Situationists were insistent that as “[the Surrealists] left it to the ‘communists’ [of the French Communist Party] to advance the cause of revolution” (Vaneigem [1977] 1999, 59) the Surrealist revolt was not adequately linked to the totality of the revolution. The Situationists, who detested the (Stalinist) French Communist Party, declared that they themselves would be a unified artistic/political avant-garde that sought a fusion of art and life.

29. Howls for Sade (1952) was Debord’s first film. As Christopher Gray (a member of the English section of the SI until excluded in 1967) writes: “[Hurlements en faveur de Sade] was a feature-length film, which, far from being pornographic, lacked any images at all; the audience being plunged into complete darkness from beginning to end, apart from a few short bursts of random monologue, when the screen went white. The last twenty-four minutes were uninterrupted silence and obscurity. In France, there was considerable violence when the film was first ‘shown.’ In London, however, when the first house came out at the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts], they didn’t even tell the queue for the next performance that there wasn’t anything to see” (Gray [1974] 1998, 3).
30. To quote Breton: “In the streets of Nantes, he [Vaché] strolled sometimes in the uniform of a hussar, an aviator, a doctor. Occasionally he would pass and not seem to recognize you and go on his way without turning round. Vaché never held out his hand to say hello or goodbye . . . It was at the Conservatoire Maubert that I met Jacques Vaché again [at the première of Apollinaire’s play Les Mamelles de Tirésias on 24 June 1917]. The first act had just ended. An English officer was making a great racket in the orchestra: it had to be Vaché. The scandal of the performance had excited him. He had come into the theatre with a revolver in his hand, and was threatening to fire into the audience” (Breton, cited from Nadeau 1978, 57).

31. Arguably, this stems from the following: the Situationists believe, I think, that liberated unconscious desire will lead to disarray and societal collapse if reason does not assert itself as the dominant partner in a fusion of passion and reason, whereas Marcuse, following the surrealists, does not appear to believe that liberated erotic desire will bring forth a condition of disorder and breakdown if reason is not the dominant partner in a fusion of passion and reason. I should add that a key difference between the Situationists and Marcuse concerns their particular views on Freud’s death instinct. While Marcuse accepts Freud’s later dualistic model of the life instincts and the death instinct, the Situationists reject this and hold (it appears) to Freud’s earlier dualistic model—that of the self-preservation instinct and the sexual instinct. Freud, Vaneigem suggests, made a “mistake” with his notion of a death instinct (Vaneigem [1967] 1994, 162).

32. For Marcuse’s comments about this, see above (in the main text). As regards the Situationists, Vaneigem ([1967] 1994, 258) claims that, “[a]ll true play involves rules and playing with rules,” and that “playfulness . . . always involves a certain spirit of organisation and the discipline this implies.” He also claims that: “Within [small intimate groups, micro-societies which may require a play leader] . . . the game can be the sole arbiter of the intricacies of communal life, harmonising individual whims, desires and passions.” Further, the Situationists claim that: “Ordinary life . . . can be dominated rationally . . . and play, radically broken from a confined ludic time and space, must invade the whole of life” (Situationist International 1958). What these claims imply, I think, is that the play impulse mediates between passion and reason.

33. For further details concerning the Situationists’ theory of unitary urbanism, see Knabb (2006, 1–8, 52).

34. The Situationists make the assumption that work is universally hated or despised. Furthermore, using—in their own way—Charles Fourier’s notion that if work is playfully organized this activity can become pleasurable (his theory of “attractive labour”), the Situationists claim that while work could be playfully organized, it would not become authentic play as it would not be entirely pleasurable and creative. As Vaneigem writes: “The [workers’] 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, 369–70).


36. As Debord writes in “Theses on Cultural Revolution” (an article published in Internationale situationniste, no. 1, June 1958): “Situationists consider cultural activity, from the standpoint of totality, as an experimental method for constructing daily life, which can be permanently developed with the extension of leisure and the disappearance of the division of labor (beginning with the division of artistic labor)” (McDonough 2002, 61).


38. The Surrealists, for example, were intrigued by the Papin Sisters. In 1933, these sisters, who had been working as servants, killed two members of the family which employed them. As Hopkins (2004, 50) recounts: “A text in . . . [Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution]
told how these impeccably bourgeois young ladies, having been placed in service by their mother in a respectable Le Mans household, had developed a loathing for their employers and had ended up murdering them with ritualistic precision.”


40. Regarding the dérve, Debord writes: “In a dérve one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there” (Knabb 2006, 62).


43. See “An overview of recorded crimes and arrests resulting from disorder events in August 2011” (Home Office 2011). The authors of this text claim that “[t]hose appearing at court tended to be from more deprived circumstances than the wider population of England: 35% of adult defendants were claiming out-of-work benefits (compared to 12% of the working age population); 42% of young people brought before the courts were in receipt of free school meals (compared to 16% of pupils in maintained secondary school); and 64% of those young people lived in one of the 20 most deprived areas in the country—only three per cent lived in one of the 20 least deprived areas” (Home Office 2011, 5). For further evidence that those who rioted (in the main) lived in economically deprived areas see, Kawalerowicz and Biggs (2015, 673–98).


47. For an analysis of the policy of austerity, see Blyth (2015).


50. For an historical account of the “golden age” of post-war capitalism, see Hobsbawm (1994, 257–286).

com/cms/s/2/ed05bb64-f86e-11e3-815f-00144feabdc0.html#slide0. Also, see the Frontier Economics Report (2015).

52. Arguably, the individuals who rioted are part of a social stratum consisting of those, in a “neo-liberal” context, who have been pushed to the margins of society.


54. The Guardian newspaper/LSE “Reading the Riots” (Guardian 2011) study noted the following: “A report from the Home Office into the crimes and arrests resulting from the riots revealed that 51% (2,584) of the crimes committed during the disorder were against commercial premises... Of the 1,385 shops hit throughout the country the most targeted were electrical stores (265), followed by clothes shops (233).”


56. It should be noted that the Situationists détourned (diverted/subverted) various newspaper images of the 1965 Watts riots in the 1966 issue of Internationale situationniste. For example, they took a (mainstream) news image of several youths with a looted cash register—which had the title “Playing with rifled cash register”—and placed this next to the text of their article on these events entitled “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy” (Knabb 2006, 194–203). Also, next to an image of a supermarket in flames they added the title: “Critique of urbanism” (see Stracey 2014, 59, 64). Through their détournement of images of the Watts riots, the Situationists were, I think, attempting a form of intervention to assist the “hopeless cases” to attain an advanced or highly developed revolutionary consciousness.

57. Marx was circumspect about the new kind of activity which he thought humans would embrace in an un-alienated post-capitalist society. The Situationists, however, were emphatic that people would overcome the condition of alienation from their “species being” through real play rather than through the activity of labour.

58. The notion that the personal computer is a “new” means of production, owned by the vast majority (as individuals), has been recognized by capitalists—it is a situation they are attempting to turn to their advantage to further their profit making. Sarah O’Connor, writing in the Financial Times (October 8, 2015) on the issue of the internet “cloud” and the “new world of work,” notes that “[e]mployers are starting to see the human cloud as a new way to get work done. White collar jobs are chopped into hundreds of discrete projects or tasks, then scattered into a virtual ‘cloud’ of willing workers who could be anywhere in the world, so long as they have an internet connection.” She quotes one of the “champions” of work and “the human cloud,” Denis Pennel, as follows: “What we see today is people taking ownership again of the means of production, because you just need a computer, your brain and a wifi connection to work” (see Sarah O’Connor. 2015. “The human cloud: a new world of work” Financial Times, October 8, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/a4b6e13e-675e-11e5-97d0-1456a776a4f5.html#axzz3z31KCAGU). Now, what could be suggested about the August 2011 riots in cities in England is the following: socially marginalized individuals, through the collective looting of such items as PCs, (partially) seized control of the “new” means of production/consumption. It was the collective character of these events—irrespective of the motivation of individual participants—which, arguably, serves as a challenge (potential or actual) to the capitalists’ quest to turn the PC and “virtual cloud” into a new way of exploiting people for the purposes of profit making.

Disclosure Statement

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Notes on Contributor

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