

Excerpts from police files on the Situationist International¹

“A dossier on the Situationist International is opened” upon the request on the Prefect of the Police, 2 July 1958. What caught their eye was the article “A Civil War in France,” which concerned the resistance to General de Gaulle, while the artistic contents of the rest of the journal² seemed insignificant.

“The journal INTERNATIONALE SITUATIONNISTE is the organ of an avant-garde artistic and cultural movement [...] Nevertheless, in the first issue, there’s a political article in which the events of May [1958] are examined in a perspective that is Left, if not extreme-Left.”

But an interview with the “artist-painter” Guy Debord calmed them. “The person concerned is an artist painter. Privately, he’s not been the object of any unfavorable remark. Until now, he’s drawn no attention from the political point of view. His name does not appear in the Archives of the Judicial Police or in the Judicial Ledgers.”

As for the organization, it was considered to be a “de facto association.” Certainly its international character was suspect, but to the extent that “the number of members is, they say, quite small,” nothing called for direct surveillance, especially since the character of the texts – judged to be hermetic, if not incomprehensible – considerably limited their social impact in the eyes of the authorities.

“The theses advanced nevertheless appear to be very abstract to the layman. [...] The activity of the ‘Situationist International,’ insignificant so far, hasn’t drawn the attention of the Prefect of Police or the national security services.”

The political article of the first issue of *Internationale situationniste* was thus, in 1958, a false alarm.³

But the poster that the Situationist International put out in October 1967 reflected the romantic idyll that it was having with the student world. The images were détourned with libertarian slogans (“What you produce belongs to you”; “Long live self-management”; “Death to the rulers”), appeals to abolish social dogma (“We already have to leave each other, to return to the enemy, to dead time . . . to work . . . to all the lies, all the families”) and an invitation to overthrow everyday life (“Don’t change employers, change the employment of life”; “And

¹ Cited in Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot, *L’Internationale situationniste, de l’histoire au mythe, 1948-2013* (Presses universitaires de France, 2015). Thanks to Fabrice de San Mateo.

² *Internationale situationniste* #1 (June 1958).

³ Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot, pp. 150-151.

the limits imposed on pleasure stimulate the pleasure of living without limits”).

This poster was more alarming to the *Renseignements généraux* (RG)⁴ than the Strasbourg scandal. In November 1967, Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and René Viénet, as well as the printer Amedeo Robles, were questioned. The RG approached the situationist “theoreticians” with less leniency than in 1958. In *On the Poverty of Student Life* they found a “radical critique of current society in all its aspects that relies upon Marxist critique,” and they were troubled by the meaning of certain formulations: to create “the ‘situation’ that renders any turning back impossible”; “to dissolve the current society and accede to the regime of freedom”; and “to live without dead time and to enjoy unhindered pleasure.”

They were especially preoccupied by the efforts at popularizing a movement that had at first appeared esoteric to them. The situationists had become aware “that a not insignificant part of the ‘proletarian masses’ could be put off by reading situationist manifestoes.” By using comic strips, they “spread a deliberately simplified revolutionary program in a form that they hoped would be attractive: encouragement of theft and unhindered sexual pleasure; rejection of all authority.” Their “ ‘didactic comics’ were more seriously threatening to the social order than all of their [other] texts.”⁵

⁴ The French equivalent of the FBI.

⁵ Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot, pp. 204-205.