

## Crawling Out of the Trashcan of History: A Review of a Translation of Jaime Semprún's *Précis de récupération* into English

In 1975, when Éditions Champ Libre published his first book, *La Guerre sociale au Portugal* (The Social War in Portugal),<sup>1</sup> Jaime Semprún was 28 years old, that is to say, just two years away from the milestone against which most ambitious people measure their past accomplishments and resolve to find their true calling in the future. The son of Jorge Semprún (1923-2011), a well-known author, actor and politician who came to France as an exile in 1939, in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War,<sup>2</sup> Jaime was born in 1947 and raised in his father's adopted country.

In the words of Miguel Amorós, Jaime at first “engaged in a brief flirtation with experimental filmmaking.” In 1967, he was a member of the crew that produced *L'horizon* (directed by Jacques Rouffio). The following year, he wrote and directed two films: a short titled *Le Meurtre du père* and a feature titled *La Sainte Famille*. According to Amorós, Jaime “later ordered [that these films were] to be destroyed.”

“Especially after May '68,” Amorós says, “in his philosophical and political education he took giant strides forward in a relatively brief span of time. [...] He was very much influenced by Situationist critique, because it provided a coherent theoretical basis and historical meaning to the youthful rebelliousness that was so widespread at the time. It gave him reasons and oriented his readings.”<sup>3</sup> In his Preface to the reprinted edition of *Manuscrito encontrado en Vitoria* (Manuscript Found in Vitoria), which he co-wrote with Semprún under the name Los Incontrolados (Spanish original 1977, reprinted in 2012 by Les Pepitas de Calabaza, English translation circa 1979),<sup>4</sup> Amorós recalled that, during one of the meetings Jaime attended, “he came to know the ex-situationist Eduardo Rothe, who shortly afterwards introduced him to Guy Debord, a person who'd already become a legend. This brief contact with Debord marked the mind of Jaime Semprún and had an influence on the evolution of his thinking that was even more important than the experience of 68.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/social-war.html>

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with *Cazarabet*, conducted in Spanish in 2017, Jaime's friend and collaborator Miguel Amorós reported that “Jorge Semprún was his father only in the biological sense. On the few occasions that Jaime, a non-conformist adolescent, mentioned him, he accused his progenitor of having been a Stalinist and therefore of having contributed to the totalitarian work of the pseudo-communist Soviet regime. His father's celebrity as a writer and a friend of politicians seemed vulgar and obscene to Jaime, as it was founded on a big lie from which he derived a good payoff. Jaime was precisely the opposite. He soberly and discreetly cultivated the truth” (anonymous translator, text posted by Alias Recluse to <https://libcom.org/article/jaime-semprun-interview-miguel-amoros> on 29 May 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. <https://notbored.org/vitoria.html>

<sup>5</sup> My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/miguel-amoros.pdf>

It appears that it was in fact Debord, frustrated with the slow activity (or inactivity) of Rothe, Afonso Monteiro and other comrades in Portugal,<sup>6</sup> who encouraged Semprún to write a book on the subject of the Portuguese Revolution. Jaime took on the project and, Amorós says, “based exclusively on what he read in the newspapers and the accounts of a comrade [Rothe] who was in Portugal during the revolution,”<sup>7</sup> quickly put together *La Guerre sociale au Portugal*, which was just as quickly submitted to and published by Champ Libre in May 1975.

“The book is magnificent,” Debord wrote to Semprún on 31 May 1975. “I believe that this is the first time that one can read a book *before* the failure of a revolution. Until now, consciousness has always arrived too late, at least in publishing! This thunderclap was permitted by the slowness of the Portuguese process, the product of the great weakness of all the factions that coexist in a disequilibrium slowed down from all aides.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Amorós, it was Debord who suggested what Semprún should write next: a book about “French ideology,” that is to say, the post-1968 French “recuperators” of revolutionary theory. Semprún got to work immediately. In a letter to him dated 17 July 1975, Debord wrote, “I marvel at the advanced state of [the manuscript of] the *Précis de récupération*. It would be a superb stroke to publish it in September, when the responses to *La Guerre sociale* will certainly still be coming in.” Debord went on to say, “we must get together for one or two evenings here [in Auvergne], to collectively conduct an exhaustive investigation into the lower depths of the Spirit of the Times. The [Iberian] peninsula, in fact, can wait, if the rapid completion of a task that would be so useful in France appears possible to you.”<sup>9</sup>

Semprún’s *Précis de récupération, illustré de nombreux exemples tirés de l’histoire récente* [Handbook of recuperation, illustrated by numerous examples drawn from recent history] was published in January 1976 by Champ Libre. When Debord did not respond after he sent him a copy of the book, Semprún fired off a letter (dated 6 February 1976, it has still not been published, which is most unfortunate). On 11 February, Debord responded to it as follows:

I am a little surprised by your letter of the 6<sup>th</sup>, with respect to the *Précis*. I do not at all believe that I have the obligation, under the penalty of leaving an ambiguous impression, to approve of those who critique in my sense of the word, and with obvious talent, people and practices that are manifestly critiquable: said otherwise, I have certainly not changed my opinion in the last six months about the flagrant ignominy of the people whom you attack.

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<sup>6</sup> “The time has come,” Debord wrote to “Rayo” (Eduardo Rothe) on 26 June 1974, in response to the posters that these comrades created and pasted up on 26 and 29 May 1974 and sent to Debord two weeks later. My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/debord-26June1974.html>. But by the start of 1975, Debord had become disillusioned. On 24 February of that year, in a letter to Monteiro, he asked, “Has Rayo pursued his book and will it be finished soon?” He also stated: “What I would like to understand better is your own position as a practical force. At this moment, what is the degree of your ‘influence’ – not on the theoretical plane – but on the plane of direct contacts? What are you principally doing and what [else] can you do? In what way can one help you?” My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/debord-24February1975.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://libcom.org/article/jaime-Semprún-interview-miguel-amoros>

<sup>8</sup> My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/debord-31May1975.html>

<sup>9</sup> My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/debord-17July1975.html>

To say thank you for a copy, and to attach a few general congratulations, would perhaps be a formalist politeness from another time. And, furthermore, the few reservations that I might have had about the book did not have such importance that they needed to be set down in writing. It is not a matter of objections to the theoretical or political principles, nor even of course, disapproval of the style.<sup>10</sup>

It will become apparent that what had changed was Debord's opinion *about the book's author*. Debord continues (same letter):

But since you have asked for it, I will summarize my critical opinion. [...] In sum, you speak bravely in the name of the pure revolution and, by the same movement, you give the impression of characterizing these ridiculous people by the sole fundamental trait that they are in the service of pure reaction, as if one day all of them had, subjectively, consciously and directly accepted being stipended by some kind of CIA. [...] I willingly admit that all this is mostly a matter of personal taste. Here, as in the use of life and the preferences among those whom one encounters in it, it is certainly not a matter of expounding upon and supporting one's own tastes, but in the perfectly vain goal of rallying to them those people who have different tastes.

In short, Semprún's *Précis* presents things (the 10 "recuperators") in black and white: they are purely reactionary, while the theory that they "recuperate" – the theory promulgated by Debord and others when they belonged to the Situationist International – is purely revolutionary. And this tendency to ignore the grey areas is something that Debord *as a person* finds not to his liking.

Debord would return to these points in his response to Semprún's angry and anguished letter of 17 December 1976, which was occasioned by Champ Libre's rejection of his book about Spain. Reprinted in *Éditions Champ Libre, Correspondence, Volume I* (Paris, 1978),<sup>11</sup> Semprún's letter reveals a great deal about what he believed he'd risked and accomplished with the publication of his first two books, but especially the *Précis*.

No doubt you know that I proposed to Champ Libre a text on Spain and [editor-in-chief Gérard] Lebovici refused. Actually, I do not think that he took the initiative to refuse such a text without having consulted you as a preliminary, which renders it practically impossible to publish in French (he is well placed to know that, with the *Précis*, I have quite joyously burned all those who are usable publishers; all this doesn't oblige Champ Libre to publish all of my writings *ad vitam eternam*, but gives the rejection all of its importance). If however by extraordinary chance you had absolutely no role in this decision, and it was solely the caprice of Lebovici, this letter will of course find itself, if not completely without subject, then at least reduced to a useful anecdote about a publisher who shows himself capable of such caprices. [...] Your agreement with this refusal

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<sup>10</sup> My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/debord-11February1976.html>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. <https://notbored.org/champ-libre.html>

seems highly improbable; it would only be possible if Lebovici had kept you informed about the presentation of the manuscript. [...] The prestige that you have greatly contributed to creating around Champ Libre now surrounds in the eyes of a certain public – unfortunately still the essential here – any text published by it as a kind of Debordist *imprimatur* (to the point that the most imbecilic faction of this public squarely attributes to you the paternity for almost all of what Champ Libre publishes, the *Précis*, among others). And what I have believed to be your position, only intervening positively to get texts published, and not negatively, getting texts turned down, is no longer tenable since you can be held to approve equally all of the texts with revolutionary intentions that this publishing house has published, and reject those that it refuses. [...] As for me, I think that it is very bad for Champ Libre to lose me as an author. [...] In what concerns me, I consider my relations with Lebovici and Champ Libre to be terminated, and I have no taste for the little, quite Parisian polemics that interest no one. What, on the contrary, is not ended is that I have reason to believe that the ‘principle’ that underpins the cloudy Lebovician critique is your hostility to the publication of the book. This hostility can have two types of reasons: either political, as serious disagreement with the defended positions, or with the manner in which they are defended; this appears unlikely to me, but it is nevertheless possible. Or *ad hominem*, as a negative judgment about the whole of my life, such that it condemns all that I can write. [...] But as this [second] hypothesis is all the same the most probable, it is necessary for me to go back to the turn taken in our relations and your most recent letter. You responded to my requests for explanations concerning your silence after the delivery of the *Précis* and a word of hello by affecting to believe that I was soliciting something like the approval of a Political Bureau, or that in it I show an antiquated concern for ‘formalist politeness.’ What appears to me as completely stamped by formalist politeness is the method of wanting to distance oneself from someone with whom one has amicably associated oneself by saying, as you told me through Alice [Becker-Ho, Debord’s wife], that one found oneself too occupied at the moment to see him. I do not believe that you are subject to whims in matters of friendship, nor in any other matter, and I think that only a quite precise and serious reason can make you suddenly put an end to relations that were up until then quite warm. [...] But in responding to me on 11 February [1976], you have not been any clearer on your reasons for putting someone off, simply alluding to ‘personal tastes’ and ‘preferences’ among the individuals that one meets. And what can one actually say in response? [...] In brief, this too-long letter can be summarized by this question: I have understood that I am no longer one of your friends; must I understand that it is necessary for me to count you among my enemies?<sup>12</sup>

There are no grey areas here: either Champ Libre publishes everything that I write or none of it; either you are my friend or you are my enemy. And how can we not be friends, especially after what I did for you, *all that I risked*, by writing the *Précis*?

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<sup>12</sup> My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/Semprún-17December1976.html>

Debord responded in a long letter to Semprún that was dated 26 December 1976 and intended for eventual publication (it would appear in *Éditions Champ Libre, Correspondence, Volume I*).

The protest that you have addressed to me entirely and openly rests upon a chain of extravagant hypotheses. One has the greatest difficulty imagining that someone believes that a single one is probable, or even simply possible, but, however, each of these arbitrary assertions appear to have established in your eyes the possibility of the next one, which is from the same barrel, and thus takes on a certain figure of coherence. [...] I would like to say clearly and in few words that *all* of these unequally offensive but likewise unsupportable hypotheses that you advance nevertheless in a tone of quasi-conviction, in which I do not believe I recognize black humor, are *completely false*. It is thus necessary that the disappointment about which you complain has another cause. [...] Beyond the fact that your hypotheses are ridiculously false, I find seriously erroneous the spirit that presides over their montage. You well know that I have no reason to be your enemy personally. But I have many enemies and one has never accused me of censoring them; nor even practicing the pseudo-condescending dissimulation of the positions of the adversary that one sees so often in the [various] Leftisms; moreover, I have always considered that the worst thing, for my enemies, is having their texts read attentively.

After a detailed and very patient explanation of his relationship with Lebovici and Champ Libre (he's just an author who occasionally makes recommendations as to what else the publishing house might also bring out), Debord turned to his personal relations with Semprún.

I am happy that you recall that, during the several months that we met each other quite often, I treated you amicably. It was sincere, and you assuredly merited it, due to your book on Portugal, which was brilliantly written under quite overwhelming conditions of urgency; the firmness of all your positions; the pleasantness of your conversation, etc. After some time, and quite suddenly, a certain ennui appeared to me to constantly dominate the major portion of each of our dialogues. I am persuaded that you had the same impression [...]. Understand well that I do not at all mean to say that you were boring [...]. I merely affirm that our conversations became gloomy. I believe that people who, together, bore each other are better off not seeing one another, whatever their agreement on a number of questions [...]. As this was not a more serious and more public disagreement, but simply a personal question of the use of time, to say that I don't have time seems to me to translate the real point well enough. [...] So as to not completely limit this question to what appears to be the sphere of the nebulous caprice – but whose caprice? – I will say that I had the impression that our relations took a bad turn after the evening I brought you to a dinner [party] of young workers, almost all of them unemployed. I was surprised by the great severity of your judgment of those people, which you issued on the way out of their place [...]. Given this cutting judgment, of which I said to you then that I did not approve, but that it didn't appear to me to merit the least effort to make you go back there, it would

be quite normal for you to hold me responsible for that evening, since it was obvious that I did not find myself too good to associate with the people whom you deplored. I certainly do not want to exaggerate the meaning of this quite harmless incident, but it is a fact that, afterwards, there was no longer the same sympathy between us. [...] Now that your most recent letter has provided me with more information, I can criticize your tendency, there where you are personally involved, to make judgments that are quite disproportionate to the facts and the people.<sup>13</sup>

Though Semprún responded quite graciously to Debord in a letter dated 14 January 1977 (it too was included in *Éditions Champ Libre, Correspondence, Volume I*),<sup>14</sup> the two men would not meet or exchange any letters until April 1984, when Semprún and the ex-situationist Christian Sébastiani contacted Debord concerning the (still unsolved) murder of Gérard Lebovici on 5 March of that year. Several months later, Semprún and Sébastiani (among others) went on to found the *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, a journal to which Debord would contribute a couple of essays in 1985 and 1986. Debord would end up breaking off relations with Semprún (again and for the last time) in early 1987, in response to the latter's support for someone named Guy Fargette, who had condemned and ridiculed the students who occupied the Sorbonne and set up barricades on 6 December 1986.<sup>15</sup> Between 1991 and 1992, *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* ceased being a journal and became a publishing house. In addition to publishing English translations of the complete works of George Orwell (four volumes between 1995 and 2001),<sup>16</sup> Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des Nuisances brought out one book by Miguel Amorós, three books by the ex-situationist René Riesel and four books by Semprún himself: *Dialogues sur l'achèvement des temps modernes* (1993), *L'Abîme se repeuple* (1997), *Apologie pour l'insurrection algérienne* (2001), and *Défense et illustration de la novlangue française* (2005), none of which have yet been translated into English.<sup>17</sup> Jaime died in 2010, one year after the passing of his father.

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According to the *Précis*, which has been translated into English by Eric-John Russell as *A Gallery of Recuperation: On the Merits of Slandering Charlatans, Swindlers, and Frauds*, and

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<sup>13</sup> My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/debord-26December1976.html>

<sup>14</sup> Cf. <https://notbored.org/Semprun-14January1977.html>

<sup>15</sup> For the background to this affair, see Jean-Pierre Baudet, letter to Guy Fargette dated 22 February 1987, Jaime Semprún's response to Baudet dated 2 March 1987, and Baudet's response to Semprún dated 5 April 1987. My translations. Cf. <https://notbored.org/baudet-22February1987.html>, <https://notbored.org/semprun-2March1987.html> and <https://notbored.org/baudet-5April1987.html>, respectively.

<sup>16</sup> Other "non-situationist" authors published by Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des Nuisances included Sophie Herszkowicz, William Morris, Theodore Kaczynski, Baudouin de Bodinat, and Jean-Marc Mandosio.

<sup>17</sup> The only book by Semprún that has been translated into English is the one he co-authored with René Riesel: *Catastrophisme, administration du désastre et soumission durable* (Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 2008), translated as *Catastrophism, disaster management and sustainable submission*, translator unknown (Roofdruk Edities, 2014).

published by MIT Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2023), the 10 “recuperators” in question – Jacques Attali, Cornelius Castoriadis, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean Franklin, André Glucksmann, Felix Guattari, Gérard Guégan, Jean-François Lyotard, and Ratgeb (aka Raoul Vaneigem)<sup>18</sup> – are virtually indistinguishable from each other. They are all “post-Situationists,” if not “pro-situs” (passive admirers of Situationist theory), as well: “The theorizing enthusiasm of recuperators,” Semprún writes, “usually begins with the obvious fact that the SI was of its time, which is now [allegedly] over, and then reaches a peak with the discovery that they themselves must therefore be better, indeed their arrival in the wake of the SI historically guarantees their great and unique superiority.”

Apparently convinced that his readers won’t know any better, Semprún writes in his Preface: “Spare me the comparisons: by far the most thankless aspect of my own work has been in establishing necessary distinctions within the shapeless magma, where the nuances of thought are so difficult to grasp that *no one* until today, among the most well-intentioned interpreters, has *ever* been able to establish, for example, what distinguished, reconciled, or contrasted the ‘libidinal economy’ of one thinker from the ‘desiring machines’ of another” (emphasis added). According to Semprún, *he alone* is able to distinguish them. But if it is true that all of these “ignominious” people “in fact have only secondhand thoughts, repressive thoughts,” if it is true that it isn’t worth his time to undertake “a serious and methodical study of all this immense literature,” which, he says, “I have no intention of doing,” why even bother to engage in such an exercise? Why not simply ignore all of them and their alleged “dullness” *en bloc*?<sup>19</sup>

The answer would seem to be narcissism: Jaime Semprún is quite impressed with himself and likes to read what he has written. The very first line of his book announces that, “If there is one argument more persuasive regarding the inevitable collapse of this society than the many books that expose its various defects, it is those, even more numerous, that attempt to propose remedies. The *obvious* superiority of my own approach, whose advantages the reader will soon appreciate, is that I don’t offer any solutions” (emphasis added). “Under my aegis,” he writes, “the thought of the recuperators reaches a consistency never before seen in their hasty and disorderly scribbles. But when you tower over your adversary, you have to begin by elevating them ever so slightly in order to land a blow.” And what makes Semprún so *obviously superior*? While “all those with a way with words blathering on about subversion and the ‘revolutionary project’ have absolutely nothing to say about the subversive reality that the Portuguese proletariat has been mounting in Europe, that is, the first social revolution to have occurred on their watch,” he has *written a book on the subject*. And this modest accomplishment – you will

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<sup>18</sup> Had Semprún (or Debord) been better informed, this list would have included Jean Baudrillard, whose book *Le Miroir de la production* (1973), translated by Mark Poster as *The Mirror of Production* (Telos Press, 1975), proclaimed “We are no longer in the society of the spectacle.” Several years later, he replaced the theory of the spectacle with his own theory of simulation (*Simulacres et Simulation*, Éditions Galilée, 1981; translated by Paul Foss, Paul Batton and Philip Beitchman as *Simulacra and Simulation*, Semiotext(e), 1985). According to Eric-John Russell, Baudrillard “appropriates situationist ideas without the pressure of needing to understand them,” but doesn’t provide any evidence for this Semprúnean claim.

<sup>19</sup> Semprún was certainly aware of this problem. In his dismissal of Michel Foucault (see below), he writes, “it should be noted that the reader will perhaps doubt that it is even worth hating or indeed vilifying someone who, despite all his efforts to mix with the riffraff, will always remain a self-righteous numbskull.” But this insight doesn’t deter him.

remember that his book was entirely based upon newspaper clippings and the things someone else told him – apparently qualifies him to be a black-hooded, cold-blooded executioner: “It is therefore a question of carrying out *in detail* the sentence *overwhelmingly* pronounced by the Portuguese Revolution against all the idiotic falsifications of the revolutionary reality around which spectacular frenzy is organized.” But shouldn’t such executions be carried out by *the Portuguese proletariat* – or rather, since all of these convicts are French, *the French proletariat* – and not by Semprún, who has appointed himself to this grisly role?

It isn’t simply the writing of a single book that has qualified Jaime Semprún to assume his crucial historical role. It is his close personal proximity to former members of the Situationist International – well, to Guy Debord, at any rate – that has elevated him to his “towering” heights. Without explaining anything about who they were or what they actually did, Semprún praises the Situationists to the skies. “The Situationist International,” he writes in “Recuperation in France since 1968,” which is the second section of his book,

ushered in a new era by knowing how to draw the old one to a close: ideas are *dangerous* again. In the class war that is beginning again everywhere, the *situationist moment* is that moment when the proletariat learns to name its modernized misery, discovers the immensity of its task and, within the same movement, becomes reacquainted with its lost history; its *first* victory was the collapse of the counterfeit social unity proclaimed by the spectacle.

Situationist theory, that is to say, the theory of the spectacle, is the “first formulation” – there were apparently none before it – of proletarians’ “modern revolutionary necessities.” According to Semprún, the Situationists were (still are?) free in ways the average person is not: “The fact is that this theory is produced by determinate individuals, individuals who have achieved self-determination in the course of practical struggle among the irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle and by acknowledging their own absence wherever the latter are absent.” But because Semprún doesn’t divulge the identities of those “irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle,” unless they are the Portuguese proletarians whose courtroom he has taken command of, all we are left with are the allegedly “self-determining” former members of the SI. Oh, yeah – and Karl Marx, we can’t forget about him. The recuperators’ “hype about the virtues of perpetual renewal merely serves the purpose of avoiding to *situate* themselves in relationship to the revolutionary thought of history, that of Marx or the SI, which they well know is impenetrable to them and something they would prefer to jettison. Truth be told, the world has not changed much since Marx.”

All this simplification makes the determination of what “recuperation” is and who the real “recuperators” are an easy matter: post-1968, everything and everybody is measured against the Marx and Situationists, well, against Guy Debord, because – since René Viénet is, in Semprún’s estimation, a “clown,” Raoul Vaneigem is a “hack” (the ex-situationists Mustapha Khayati, Michèle Bernstein, René Riesel and Gianfranco Sanguinetti aren’t even mentioned by him) and Karl Marx is dead – Debord is the only one still standing.

But Jaime Semprún is just not on Guy Debord’s level, even if Debord himself is not everything he is cracked up to be.<sup>20</sup> Unlike his good buddy (for a couple of months), Semprún is

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<sup>20</sup> For example: during his correspondence with Semprún and, no doubt, elsewhere, Debord stubbornly maintained that Jean-Patrick Manchette (a well-known writer of detective stories)

not above censoring his enemies, practicing the pseudo-condescending dissimulation of their positions and refusing to read their texts attentively. In fact, such procedures are his *modus operandi*.

Semprún quite clearly censors the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who are known in part for being collaborators with each other. (Their best-known work is *L'Anti-Oedipe* [1972], which was a landmark in the critique of Freud and psychoanalysis.) Semprún's entry for Deleuze says "Dumber than Guattari (see *Guattari, Felix*)," and the one for Guattari says "Dumber than Deleuze (see *Deleuze, Gilles*)." In other words, Semprún doesn't allow either one to speak, to say anything at all. They are reduced to silence. The meaning of this gesture is quite clear: separately and together, Deleuze and Guattari supposedly have literally nothing to say. But of course such a determination should be left up to their readers, not to someone who thinks that such a stupid joke is "funny." This isn't a matter of "unreadability" ("thoughtless hucksters," Semprún says in the second part of his book, "remain quite simply *unreadable*"): this is simply a matter of *refusing to read*.

With respect to Michel Foucault, who by 1975 had written and published more than a half-dozen major works on a variety of subjects (most notably *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* [Madness and Insanity: History of Madness in the Classical Age], published many years before May 1968), Semprún writes, "I should mention that I have never read a single one of this man's books, nor those of his colleagues in general, but that I happened, while distractedly leafing through his latest one (*Discipline and Punish*) in a bookshop – and just as boredom was beginning to put me to sleep – to come across the above-mentioned gem about Lacenaire, which woke me up." The "gem" in question was Foucault's opinion that this infamous French criminal was a "ruined petty bourgeois, well educated and literate," "a reassuring character," who, "despite all his good will, his neophyte's zeal, [...] was only able to commit, and even then with a singular lack of skill, no more than a few minor crimes." *Heresy! Lacenaire was a revolutionary!* "I did not feel of a mind, naturally," Semprún went on to say, "to undertake my own assessment of the rest of the volume's jewelry, aware of the public's lack of interest in tawdry junk." And so he doesn't know that Foucault's remarks about Lacenaire are peripheral to the central subject of the book, which is the invention of the prison as an institution.

But at least Semprún opened up Foucault's book and had a look inside. Henri Lefebvre, the author of several books that in the early 1960s had a profound influence upon Debord, Vaneigem and the other situationists (he pioneered the "critique of everyday life"), is ridiculed and dismissed on the basis of something *written by someone else* and printed on the back cover of one of his books: "according to the blurb accompanying his latest philosophical marmalade (*Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche: Or, The Realm of Shadows*), [Lefebvre] 'travels the world trying to achieve global thinking.' Keep on running! If ever Lefebvre's mind does lift off into cosmic overdrive, he will surely achieve planetary orbit."

Semprún does virtually the same thing when he ridicules and dismisses the entire body of work of Cornelius Castoriadis, who, in the 1950s, due to his essays for the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, had a profound and lasting influence on the Situationists (his major themes included such putatively "Situationist" ideas as "the organization question," Workers' Councils and

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didn't exist and was actually Jean-Pierre George using a pseudonym. He was wrong: they were two distinct people.

bureaucratic capitalism).<sup>21</sup> “Comprehensive breaking news on this shape-shifting dupe,” Semprún says, “is provided on the back cover of his latest excrement (*The Imaginary Institution of Society*), whose gelatinousness alone would be enough to persuade me, if need be, to consider his case definitively settled: it’s a book whose very blurb is enough to *torpedo it*.”

By “definitively settling” these “cases” in this self-satisfied, condescending and perfunctory fashion, Judge/Executioner Semprún is doing his readers a double disservice. Not only is he encouraging them to *look* at books but not actually *read* them (and this at a time when many people were beginning to get their “information” from television shows, not from books, magazines or newspapers), but he is also falsifying the intellectual history of the Situationists, who certainly read and learned a great deal from many books by several different writers (especially Castoriadis) before they started to write their own. In sum, Semprún is not *combating* superficiality and anti-intellectualism; he is *encouraging and fostering* them. And he’s not “situating” the Situationists; he’s separating them off from their cultural and intellectual context, thus making it look like no one (other than Karl Marx, of course) influenced them or taught them anything worth knowing.

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Semprún’s book didn’t include a Bibliography – for what would be the point of making a list of all the books that he refused to read? Nevertheless, it is a shame that *A Gallery of Recuperation* doesn’t include one, for it would be quite instructive to see a list of such books, to see their prodigious range and depth, and to see that several of the authors insulted and dismissed by Semprún were in fact active for several years before May 1968, that they didn’t suddenly come out of the woodwork in the aftermath of that uprising. Perhaps a Bibliography wasn’t generated because the original edition didn’t have one. There weren’t any endnotes in the original edition, but that didn’t stop the translator (Eric-John Russell) from adding them, and it is a good thing that he did: they make it much easier for the reader to make sense of the author’s references, some of which might not be obvious to English-language readers of a French text that is almost 50 years old.

There was also no Index in the original French version, but there should have been one created for this translation. Without an Index, the reader has no way to track down the author’s references to the 10 “recuperators” in the other sections of the book, that is to say, in the sections other than the “Small Dictionary of the Great Names of Recuperation,” or his references to other people, places and events that the reader might be interested in. I’m not sure who should take the blame for this omission, the translator or the publisher (I realize that creating an Index is a specialized skill and can only be done after the final pagination has been established), but someone clearly dropped the ball here.

What the translator *did* include is “By This Sign Thou Shalt Conquer: An Introduction to the English Translation of A Gallery of Recuperation,” which, including its own set of endnotes, is 67 pages long – fully half the length of the text that it introduces. In other words, this

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<sup>21</sup> Because the influence of Castoriadis and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was not acknowledged by Debord or the SI, Castoriadis felt justified in saying that “Guy Debord is a little impostor and falsifier who plundered *S. ou B.*” (letter of 19 July 1975 to Jordi Orrent Bestit; “Deux lettres sur l’activité révolutionnaire et la situation en Espagne,” in *Quelle Démocratie?* 1990, my translation).

Introduction takes up one-third of the book as a whole. Divided into seven sections, this massive text includes information that is clearly relevant to what follows and helps the reader put it into perspective: the circumstances of the book's conception ("A Lost Art of Insult"), a biography of the book's author and brief introductions to the 10 people insulted and dismissed by him ("Cast of Characters"), and a summary of the post-1968 events that inspired the author to take up his pen ("A Decade of Restoration" and "All the World's a Means of Purchase"). But also included is a great deal of information about events that took place (long) after the book's publication and that, strictly speaking, are not directly relevant to its contents and long ruminations about contemporary recuperation ("A Note on Ventriloquism," "A Difficult Parry" and especially "Toward a Theory of Twenty-First-Century Charlatanism"). It might have been better if these sections had been deleted, pared down or moved to the back of the book and labeled Appendices or Epilogues.

This is not to say that the truly useful and relevant sections of the Introduction do not contain assertions that one might disagree with. Though Semprún himself described the writings of the 10 "recuperators" as an undifferentiated "magma" of idiocies and the "recuperators" themselves as virtually interchangeable, and though his method of insulting and dismissing them didn't change much from one "numbskull" to another, the translator asserts that,

These writers, intellectuals, artists, philosophers, and leftists are registered as distinct tendencies of recuperation within the spheres of economics, philosophy, art, psychoanalysis, social critique, literature, and politics. The book is, in a word, a painterly reflection on the concept of recuperation with a set of concrete figurations. [...] [Semprún's] entries refer of course to individuals, yet those personalities are best construed as personifications of the objective process of recuperation, wherein forces of abstraction have carved individual profiles, a sacrifice of the particular to the universality of the commodity economy that wields personified representations as bulwarks for its reproduction.

But Semprún in fact says *nothing* about the "objective process of recuperation," and the translator himself even cites Guy Debord as a confirmation of this fact: "Yet an outstanding criticism of *A Gallery of Recuperation*, one formulated in fact by Debord, is that Semprún fails in deciphering general social tendencies in the phenomenon of recuperation, remaining within the idiosyncrasies of individual personalities and never quite bringing that reality to its concept."<sup>22</sup>

The translator insists "not all the names [of the "recuperators"] will ring familiar to Anglophone readers." I guess this depends on who those readers are, on what their reading habits are, on how well informed they are about the subject(s) at hand. He insists that "here we first encounter economist and technocrat Jacques Attali," though nearly a half-dozen of his books have been translated into English, including *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, which was

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Debord to Semprún dated 11 February 1976: "What is missing, between the origin and the result, is the critique of the process itself, the work of recuperation. By which concrete routes, by hiding what, or by falsifying what, do these people operate on diverse occasions? And, moreover, what are the various motivations that make them act: the taste for which phony glory in which phony moment, which deceptions, which disgraced attractions, which lack of capacities and time?" My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/debord-11February1976.html>

translated by Brian Massumi and published by the University of Minnesota Press in 1985.<sup>23</sup> The translator insists that “thereafter we discover Cornelius Castoriadis,” though more than a dozen of his books have been published in English-language translations, including the three-volume set *Political and Social Writings*, published by the University of Minnesota Press between 1988 and 1992.<sup>24</sup>

But these failures to acknowledge the non-obscure of these two particular writers is, in my opinion, dwarfed by the translator’s complicity in keeping the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix in an obscurity that they do not at all deserve. Note well their absence from this apparently complete summary of the contents of Semprún’s book, which uncritically repeats and thus ratifies its author’s two-dimensional “portraits” of these three-dimensional writers.

What do Semprún’s figures promise? Attali promises that the march of the economy can lead to utopia; Castoriadis promises that dated sociological observations can be recycled into novelties; Foucault promises that criminology can be wrested from police management; Franklin promises that cultural and philosophical fragments are adequate for grandiose critical stature; Glucksmann promises that contrarian indignation over open secrets is enough to propel a career; Guégan promises that literary clichés of revolutionary practice are a fine substitute for revolution itself; Lyotard promises that following your libidinal impulse can elevate your employability; and Ratgeb promises that the appearance of extremism can help conceal your unimportance.

Elsewhere in his Introduction, the translator speaks of “a new metaphysics of desire, itself a reaction to the frigidity of structuralism, an affirmation of erotic spontaneity against the rigid routines of modern life.” Sounds good to me, just as it would probably sound good to the rioters and building-occupiers of May 1968 who wrote “I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires,” “Desiring reality is great! Realizing your desires is even better!” “Unbutton your mind as often as your fly,” “The bourgeoisie has no other pleasure than to degrade your pleasures,” “Constraints imposed on pleasure incite the pleasure of living without constraints,” “The more I make love, the more I want revolution. The more I make revolution, the more I want to make love,” “Total orgasm,” etc. etc. on the walls of Paris.<sup>25</sup>

But the translator goes on to say, “This general glorification of the unconscious, and its rejection of norms and laws in the name of a revolutionary ethos, would, in the case of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and with a certain naïve naturalism, allegedly release the creative and contestatory energies of madness, allowing schizophrenic fragmentation and fantasy to become models of revolution.” It’s as if, like Semprún, he hasn’t actually read *Anti-Oedipus*, but only critiques of it by people who might or might not have actually read the book themselves. Deleuze and Guattari didn’t “glorify” the unconscious; they attempted to show that, contrary to what was claimed or assumed, first by Sigmund Freud and then by Jacques Lacan (the “French Freud”), the unconscious doesn’t represent itself, it doesn’t limit itself to representations of desires (as in a theatrical production), it produces itself, it constructs situations, assemblages and

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<sup>23</sup> For my review of this book, cf. <https://notbored.org/attali.html>

<sup>24</sup> For my reviews of these three books, cf. <https://notbored.org/councils.html>, <https://notbored.org/castoriadis.html> and <https://notbored.org/strangers.html>

<sup>25</sup> Compiled by Ken Knabb from various sources. Cf. <https://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/graffiti.htm>

mechanisms (as in a factory). Deleuze and Guattari didn't seek to "release" the energies of madness or to establish schizophrenia as a "model for revolution"; they tried to show that capitalism itself is schizophrenic and drives people insane, that capitalism both produces schizophrenia and cynically attempts to "recuperate" it for its own cynical uses. (It must not be forgotten that Guattari was a practicing psychiatrist, ran an alternative clinic, saw the ravages of schizophrenia up close and in-person, and tried to treat schizophrenics without relying on the standard practices of simply drugging them and/or confining them in mental institutions.)

Of course, the translator wants his readers to believe that *A Gallery of Recuperation* is relevant to contemporary society and that it is ripe for a "revival." He writes,

the overarching question of this book is whether the conception of recuperation [...] can be sharpened in light of fifty or sixty years of the society of the spectacle's dulling mechanisms of falsification [...]. Conceptually, Jaime Semprún's 1976 *A Gallery of Recuperation* [...] stands as a significant register within such a query, one not without pertinence for the present moment.

But just as it is meaningless to talk of heresy in the absence of any orthodoxy, it is meaningless to talk of recuperation in the absence of a revolutionary movement, of revolutionary theory. The one is dependent on the other. There are indeed revolutionary movements (if not revolutionary theories) active in the world today, but the translator doesn't mention any. And if it is true, as Debord asserted in a letter to Juvénal Quillet, that recuperation "is not the mythically absolute evil of which the comrades of 1968 spoke, but [...] a *permanent* process,"<sup>26</sup> then there is no sense in singling out any particular group of "recuperators" for ridicule and condemnation.

As if ratifying his own assertion that "look closely enough at any radical academic and you will find a publicist, if not a used car salesperson," the translator asserts that,

with this translation, the book [by Semprún] has the potential of a revival insofar as it contains entries on intellectuals who have now, from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first, become dominant staples of Anglophone academic and continental philosophy, most notably Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Felix Guattari, and Jean-François Lyotard. Its English translation offers the distinctive opportunity to redeem the book from its obscurity, by making an intervention on what today amounts to commanding intellectual trends precisely *within* the Anglophone world.

But that's just it, you see: in France in the 1970s, the opinions and insights of radical intellectuals regularly appeared in newspapers, on television and on the radio. They appealed to, and sometimes were heard by, people outside academia. This was precisely what made them unpalatable to extremists such as Semprún and Debord. But today, in the Anglo-American world, postmodern or poststructuralist theorists do not appear in the mass media; their only audiences lie *within the academic world*. Nobody outside of Anglo-American universities has even heard of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Felix Guattari or Jean-François Lyotard or, for that matter, their Anglo-American counterparts. And so nobody will care that there is a book – once obscure, now translated into English – that ridicules and dismisses these very people.

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<sup>26</sup> My translation. Cf. <https://notbored.org/debord-14December1971.html>

No, *A Gallery of Recuperation* was, is and will remain obscure: it is little more than an historical novelty, a relic from a time that has long since past, something of interest only to collectors of Situationist memorabilia, an embarrassment, a hatchet job, a “register” of what a not-so-young-man wrote in the hopes of currying favor with his idol, a man who could (hopefully) get other books by him published.

And so I say to MIT Press and other academic publishers: if you are going to publish any more works by or about the ex-members of the Situationist International, focus on those who are *still alive*, on those who have long been unjustly vilified or totally ignored, on René Viénet, Raoul Vaneigem, Mustapha Khayati, Michèle Bernstein, René Riesel and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, on what they’ve managed to do since the dissolution of their organization, despite the fact that slanderers such as Semprún (and Debord himself) have consigned them to the trashcan of history.

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Bill Brown