

# Document beyond debate

## by Guy Debord<sup>1</sup>

Comrades:

In casting back into their nothingness the contemplatives and incompetents who counted on a perpetual membership in the SI [Situationist International], we have taken a great step forward. We must continue to advance; because now an era is over *for the SI too* and is *better understood*. The undeniable success that we have registered in this case was so easy, and so *belated*, that certainly no one will think we have the right to settle back for a few weeks to gloat over it. Yet already over the last few weeks a certain lethargy has begun to manifest itself again (without, in my opinion, any longer having the previous excuses or semi-justifications) when it comes to developing our present positions.<sup>2</sup> I believe that we are all in agreement on the urgency of reaching precise conclusions on the following points:

(a) Thorough critique (and theorization useful in the future) of the principal failures of the SI. I suppose that this was *implicit* in the phase that preceded the [start of the orientation] debate; but too often in the past the SI's conduct, even in what it has done excellently, was founded on a simple, implicit accord or participation. It is necessary that everything now becomes explicit. For example, personal anecdotes concerning the propensity of [Paolo] Salvadori for furious logic, or [Raoul] Vaneigem for radical timidity concealed in rabbit's fur, aren't sufficient explication for this failure.

(b) Definition of "the SI Organization": serious choice on our strategy and notably with regard relations with our many partisans (those with whom we've had the pleasure or displeasure of meeting directly are *rare enough*; almost all the best are the *furthest away*). Here we will pose precise questions: who do we eventually want to admit into the SI? – or none at all? (This obviously being tied to what we ourselves clearly recognize as the real conditions of our activity.)

(c) A highly advanced and precise theory of revolutionary organization, incorporating the experiences of the old [19th century] proletarian movement, May [1968], [and] ours.

Points (a) and (b) are preliminaries to the production of issue #13.<sup>3</sup> Point (c), quite vast, one fears premature development, but it can be begun. Moreover, we can't forget that, *if*

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<sup>1</sup> Dated 28 January 1971, this document was one of Debord's many contributions to the internal "orientation debate" that the Situationist International conducted between April 1968 and January 1971. It is in fact the last document in that debate. A collection of 35 such documents was circulated in 1974 by the *Centre de recherche sur la question sociale* (CRQS) in the form of a green-covered volume of mimeographed reproductions called *Debat de l'Orientation de l'Ex-Internationale Situationniste, 1969-1971*. In 2000, a website created by Franck Einstein offered a collection of 40 of these documents (all of them, apparently) under the title "Documents Situationnistes, 1969-1970." It is this website that provided the source for the present translation. Ken Knabb's *Situationist International Anthology* (1981) includes an excerpted translation of Debord's text from 28 January 1971, which he mark's "Untitled Text." The present translation, made by Bill Brown and uploaded to the NOT BORED! website (notbored.org) in 2004, is complete and unexpurgated. It also includes footnotes, which are not present in Knabb's book.

<sup>2</sup> Begin passage left out by Ken Knabb.

<sup>3</sup> The French situationists planned to publish a thirteenth issue of their journal *L'Internationale Situationniste*, but it never came out.

henceforth no routine can be used to protect any sort of comfort among us, then we have complete freedom of decision: for example, nothing requires us to publish issue #13, etc. It will thus be necessary that each one enunciates his opinion (or his doubts) on these questions. The only *sine qua non*<sup>4</sup> condition of our collective decision is that it must be fundamentally satisfactory to each one, without, as previously, involving trouble or lies: for example, it is quite clear that, since I have been led to make several, quite necessary intellectual progressions, one will never see me unwittingly playing the role of leader (approved but not followed) or *employée* (unpaid) in the SI or in any other group. In what follows, I will formulate in relative disorder several of my ideas concerning point (a).

In the last five years [since 1966], during which the deficiencies of one supported the deficiencies of others (and, *at least* in the case of Vaneigem, I believe that such support constituted a precise tactic), one can set apart several cases of complete but truly sympathetic incapacity (Strijbosch)<sup>5</sup> or ignoble imbecility (Beaulieu)<sup>6</sup> and several cases in which remarkable individuals – that is to say, capable of quickly becoming remarkable – have been overtaken by a relatively aberrant character trait that has prevented them from supporting engagements on points that shouldn't present any difficulty for people of their quality (for example and to be simple about it: the strong, insane love of Nicholson-Smith's wife, or the feverishness dramatized in Rothe's polemic).<sup>7</sup> Beyond this, I see two distinct tendencies, allied with each other (to different degrees): inability and bluffing. On one side, there are those who always remain faithful approvers of whatever the SI does, without wanting to bear their share of the inconveniences and seeking *some small advantage* for their personal lives (Vaneigem, [Mustapha] Khayati, [Alain] Chevalier). On the other side, there are those for whom formal participation in the SI has brought on a kind of dizziness, in which they demand *their abstract rights* as "militants" in an enterprise that they haven't really understood or enriched or even militated against, even as they tried to pile on the joyous comforts; those people with ambitions within the SI (so as to springboard towards a "high position" on the outside); those who would like to have power in the SI, and precisely over the only form that they find shocking: the power of exclusion (you will have easily recognized here Garnault, Chasse, Salvadori, Verlaan).<sup>8</sup> I will now resume my conclusions in this deplorable examination with four rough theses.<sup>9</sup>

1) The SI recently was in danger of becoming not only inactive and ridiculous, but co-opted and counterrevolutionary. The lies multiplying within it were beginning to have a mystifying and disarming effect outside. The SI could, in the very name of its exemplary actions in the previous period, have become *the latest form of revolutionary spectacle*, and you know those who would have liked to maintain this role for another ten or twenty years.

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<sup>4</sup> Latin for "indispensable condition."

<sup>5</sup> Jan Strijbosch, a member of the Dutch section of the SI, was excluded in July 1966.

<sup>6</sup> François de Beaulieu, a member of the French section, resigned May 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Nicholson-Smith, a member of the British section, was excluded December 1967. Eduardo Rothe, a member of the Italian section, was excluded Spring 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Garnault (French section) was excluded in January 1967. Robert Chasse (American) was excluded January 1970. Paolo Salvadori (Italian) was excluded in Summer 1970. Tony Verlaan (American) resigned in December 1970.

<sup>9</sup> End passage left out by Ken Knabb.

2) The process of alienation gone through by various past emancipatory endeavors (from the Communist League to the FAI,<sup>10</sup> or even, if this comparison should also be evoked in our case, surrealism) was followed by the SI in all its easily recognizable forms: theoretical paralysis; “party patriotism”; lying silence on increasingly evident faults; imperious dogmatism; wooden language addressed to the miners of Kiruna<sup>11</sup> – still rather far off, fortunately – and to Iberian exiles; invisible titles of ownership possessed by little cliques or individuals over one or another sector of our relations or activities, on the basis of their being “SI members” (much as people used to invoke the privileges of being a “Roman citizen”); ideology and dishonesty. Naturally this process took place this time *in the present historical conditions*, that is to say, to a large extent in the very conditions created by the SI; so that many features of past alienations were precluded. This set of conditions could have made a counterrevolutionary subversion of the SI all the more dangerous if it had succeeded, but at the same time it made such a success difficult. I think that this danger virtually no longer exists: We have so well *smashed* the SI in the preceding months that there is scarcely any chance that that *title* and *image* could become harmful by falling into bad hands. The situationist movement – in the broad sense of the word – is now diffused more or less everywhere. And any of us, as well as some of the excluded members, could at any time, in the name of the SI’s past and of the radical positions presently needing to be developed, speak *by himself* to the revolutionary current that listens to us; but that is precisely what Vaneigem will be unable to do. On the other hand, if a neo-Nashist regrouping dared to form, a single pamphlet of 20 pages would suffice to demolish it. To smash the SI and reduce to nothing the dubious pretensions that would have been able to preserve it as an alienated and alienating model – this had become at least our most urgent revolutionary duty. On the basis of these new measures of security we have fortunately implemented, we can now probably do better.

3) The SI had (and still has, but fortunately with less of a monopoly on it) the most radical theory of its time. On the whole it knew how to formulate, disseminate and defend it. It often was able to *struggle well* in practice; and some of us have often even been capable of conducting our personal lives in line with that theory (which was, moreover, a necessary condition for enabling us to formulate its main points in the first place). But the SI has not applied its own theory *in the very activity of the formulation of that theory* or in the *general conditions of its struggle*. The partisans of the SI’s positions have for the most part not been their creators or their real agents. They were only more official and more pretentious pro-situs. This has been the SI’s main fault (avoidable or not?). To have gone so long without being aware of it has been its worst error (and to speak for myself, *my* worst error). If this attitude had prevailed, it would have been the SI’s ultimate crime. As an organization, the SI has *partly* failed; and this has been the part in which it has failed. It was thus necessary to apply to the SI the critique it had applied, often so well, to the dominant modern society. (It could be said that we were rather well organized to propagate our [theoretical] program, but not our organizational one.)

4) The numerous deficiencies that have marked the SI were *invariably* produced by individuals who needed the SI in order to be something personally; and that something was never

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the SI’s relationship with the FAI (Italian Anarchist Federation), see “On the decomposition of our enemies,” in *The Veritable Split in the International: Public Circular of the Situationist International* (Chronos, 1974).

<sup>11</sup> “In the course of the Scandinavian report, it was unanimously decided that a declaration of support would be sent to the strikers in Kiruna. The decision was executed with much pleasure the next day in Trier.” *Report from the Delegates Conference held in Wolsfield and Trier*, 19 January 1970, signed by JV Martin, Claudio Pavan, René Riesel and Tony Verlaan.

the real, revolutionary activity of the SI, but its opposite. At the same time, they praised the SI to the extreme, both to make it seem that they subsisted in it like fish in water and to give the impression that their personal extremism was above any vulgar corroboration of facts and acts. And yet the alternative has always been quite simple: either we are fundamentally equal (and prove it) or we are *not even comparable*. As for us here, we can take part in the SI *only if we don't need it*. We must first of all be *self-sufficient*; then, secondarily, we may lucidly combine our *specific* (and specified) desires and possibilities for a collective action that, on that condition, *may* be the correct continuation of the SI.<sup>12</sup>

While waiting for everyone's texts, and persuaded that everyone knows that it is not a question of reconstituting the old style of pseudo-debate such as had been conducted this past Spring [1970], I would like to cite an example that gives me the impression of a spontaneous return to the boring habits of yore. I must say that I find grotesque the publication of the verbal pseudo-trial by "The Association of the Friends of the International," which was inflicted the other night by Comrade [René] Viénet on the esteemed comrade Lehning.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, we were all there, and all of our objections – *on that day* – didn't interrupt the unfolding of the ceremony. I believe that the current moment isn't the time for such pleasantries and that, in all cases, these pleasantries become intrigues with a most-talented frivolity; and *especially* when we aren't united on using them as backdrop. A problem of detail immediately comes up: I believe that this "Association" has been formed to serve as cover for *two precise activities of the SI*. I would thus love to know if, as an autonomous logic with which we are not acquainted, it now involves other projects, necessities or pseudo-necessities. In May 1970, Comrade Viénet wrote that the future will tell if he "was ready to supersede the stage of blasé and almost pessimistic participation." As we have arrived at a different moment, I would like him to tell us if he estimates himself to always be blasé and pessimistic, and, in the affirmative, *concerning whom* and what. On the whole, I fear that he is too confident when it comes to the central problems that we now have on our hands, and that, on the other hand, he manifests too strong a propensity to settle certain subordinate problems concerning our collective activity (questions of publishing or money) all alone, more or less elsewhere, with the indisputable authority of a specialist. On 27 July [1970],<sup>14</sup> I deplored the fact that he neglected the "most general capacities that he possessed in a wild state." The time to use them is now or never.

I hope that the texts that respond to this one will contribute to a most complete elucidation of our concrete problems.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Begin passage left out by Ken Knabb.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Lehning was a Dutch anarchist. Viénet resigned shortly thereafter (February 1971).

<sup>14</sup> In the document titled "Remarks on the SI Today."

<sup>15</sup> End passage left out by Ken Knabb.