

Letter from Guy Debord to the participants in the national conference of *Pouvoir Ouvrier*¹

Comrades:

The last national conference of *Pouvoir Ouvrier* [held 24 April 1961], as the near-totality of the participants are certainly aware, was not very satisfying. More serious than the weakness of the theses chosen for debate, the functioning of the discussion made appear at every instant how the real organization of *Pouvoir Ouvrier* is radically foreign to the new type of revolutionary organization justifiably defended and illustrated by all the work of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* journal. To say this is nothing new; the organization has never hesitated to present its frank critique of itself at the most general levels. Unfortunately, what appears new is the drawing conclusions.

The inseparable questions of the proper life of the organization and its external work are dominated by the organization's mistrust of all sorts of novelties – including those that are clearly foreseen in its programmatic texts – and by the infinitely weak use that it puts the participation and creativity of its militants, who are united, however, on the basis of complete participation.

The survival – in practice – of the conceptions of specialized revolutionary activity and specialized militants, not only affects *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, in so far as a bureaucratic nucleus has formed (because *Pouvoir Ouvrier* has banished the logical outcome of the specialized militant: the permanent one), but also it offers a terrain of choice for diverse variants of dogmatism. The inevitable division in *Pouvoir Ouvrier* – where it doesn't develop veritable political oppositions – again manifestly creates a division into two age groups, but, in the last analysis, is independent of age: it is an unacknowledged division, not even a useful one, between teachers and students.

The division of society into directors and executants is nearly abolished as such at the heart of *Pouvoir Ouvrier* (by the revolutionary ideology, the status and the weak dimension of the organization and its current tasks), but it reappears under its corollary aspect of division between “actors” and spectators. This spectacle doesn't lack very instructive aspects; but it is external to the revolutionary project in that one encounters the frequently made justification for the spectacle as a form of instruction, at the same time that all instruction traditionally presents itself in the mode of spectacle.

In the spectacle of *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, there are stars – of whom several appear to me very interesting, it is unnecessary to recall. The regrettable thing is that their relationship to the spectators whom they attract (and even on the points on which they maintain a precise accord with the spectators) remains quite secondary in comparison to the continuous interplay between them and indefinitely repeatable. Their spectacular opposition has never been sanctioned by anything; the stars never convince one another: they neutralize themselves day after day. So that the interventions of the spectators, even in the optimum case in which they are authenticated by

¹ Dated 5 May 1961, this letter of resignation was published in *Guy Debord, Correspondance*, Volume 2, September 1960 – Décembre 1964 (Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2001). Translated by Bill Brown and uploaded to the *NOT BORED!* website in April 2005.

the mediation of a star, only encounters the impotence of decision proper to the sphere of the invulnerable combatants.

The official meetings of *Pouvoir Ouvrier* are truly something Homeric, not only for the invectives of the gods who confront each other in them, but by the species of immortality of their quarrel, which seems to remain over the heads of several generations of militants, those mortals. (An example of this habitual mechanism: the tactical recourse to [rhetorical] vehemence is accepted – regretfully – by several members of the *Pouvoir Ouvrier* elite, who have allowed such vehemence to those of long standing. I think that it intimidates many comrades who keep quiet or censor themselves on the most important questions. However, if one chooses to confront this tactic on its own terrain, the unusual tone is generally perceived as insolent, or even as bad faith.)

It is clear that I do not deny the possibility, for certain young militants, to quickly accede to the sector of the stars. I deny the interest of this promotion.

It is a thick and concrete separation of roles, not some heavy fatality of all collective action, that thrusts the richest communications of interest and efficacy (including, of course, that of the “stars,” of which the official spectacle of *Pouvoir Ouvrier* only lets an impoverished reality filter through) into the clandestinity of informal relations. The crushing role of unconscious, uncritiqued habits in all the relations between the comrades of *Pouvoir Ouvrier* explains the survival, at first sight unbelievable, of certain habits of incoherent thought in a project as theoretically sound as *Pouvoir Ouvrier*.

One can “understand,” on the “human” plane, many of the defects in *Pouvoir Ouvrier* (the pre-eminence of several sour or automatic personal relations) by recognizing them as the products of an isolation courageously accepted by a limited group of people. But, on the political plane, there is no excuse to dutifully let these problems rot, which impedes the transformation of a transitory group of “critique and orientation” into a revolutionary organization.

The task of revolutionaries today is to create an organization such as *Pouvoir Ouvrier* “at another level” of politics. This task cannot wait until such-and-such a date or time; it is necessary to create it now, or never, because, in all constituted organizations on this side of the qualitative leap, time doesn’t work for the organization, but against it.

So, the wait-and-see-ism of many comrades, who think that the numerical development of *Pouvoir Ouvrier* will bring it into closer relation with its fundamental goals, seems little justified to me. I have stated that the people quite capable of understanding all of the implications of *Pouvoir Ouvrier*’s platform are already part of the organization. If they weren’t, one could discuss the necessity of waiting for them. But they are already there. However, they hardly express themselves: *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, founded on the contestation of all aspects of current society, is not particularly favorable to the contestation of the least of its own habits. A certain conformism, in which probably no comrade can individually recognize himself, appears as an alienated will in the functioning of the organization.

The unfortunate consequences, among the people who are precisely assembled on the perspectives of a radical critique, are obvious. Barjot² wrote in a note at the end of I[n]ternal B[ulletin] #17 (May 1960): “the organization is called upon to enlarge. Whatever its current ideological richness, it will be, without doubt, little in comparison with the contributions it can furnish to new categories of adherents. It will be impossible for us, not only to profit from the enrichment of the organization’s ideology, but simply to integrate these new adherents, if we do

² A pseudonym of Cornelius Castoriadis.

not disencumber ourselves of a sectarianism inherited from the past. . . .” One couldn’t say it better.

The argument, very frequent in *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, according to which all the faults of its functioning do not prevent it from being “the best,” the most conscious [organization] – thus the basis for a subsequent development more in conformity with its principles – obviously supposes that one addresses oneself to someone who defines himself, preliminarily, as a revolutionary militant (resolved to work in all cases in a political organization that is closest to his ideas). The use of this argument is in absolute contradiction with the general analysis of the depoliticization of modern capitalist society; and in absolute contradiction with the project of a new type of organization, which can only constitute itself by calling upon a completely different spirit than that of the traditional revolutionary militant, who is en route to disappear from the entire surface of the planet.

The idea, more unfortunate than derisory, according to which the reality of the organization can (must) sovereignly escape from all contestation, naturally limits the exercise of this contestation to the particular people who leave it, or, more generally, to those who do not join it. It is equally the weight of this idea that renders null the work of “rectifying” *Pouvoir Ouvrier*: all critique of what this organization rejects in its “unconscious” will be boldly taxed by sabotage – by the paralyzing instances of the Superego of the organization, to continue this dubious psychoanalytic analogy.

The fundamental critique is thus hindered; one throws away the ballast with all the rest. One says to us: the organization is what it is, but at least it exists. Elsewhere, there is nothing like it. It is piquant to recover in this sort of sentimental blackmail the vacant Bolshevik illusion – with the masses at least – of Trotsky at the Thirteenth Congress (“right or wrong, it is my Party”), an illusion of which one has seen the long exploitation. I believe that it is, at first, more correct to ask oneself, as the English comrades did in their platform, to what extent an unsuccessful attempt by a new revolutionary organization risks aggravating the discouragement of the workers. In the French group, the question is a little different, especially since it is a question of students, the teacher/student relationship doesn’t really weigh upon certain people, and even less when it is masked by an ideology that expressly critiques relationships of this type. But, in the end, the undiscussed recognition of the great revolutionary value of the organization cannot suffice to prevent discouragement, even among students, who have not really been integrated into the organization. One can be assured that if they haven’t succeeded in understanding the reasons for their disappointment, they will discreetly leave with a bad conscience.

As to the quite real fact that, for many, *Pouvoir Ouvrier* represents a terrain of socialization, a game, etc., I don’t think that this merits consideration from the point of view of the revolutionary critique of human affairs, which normally leads to a good number of [organizational] ruptures. These even include the ruptures by several young militants that Barjot seems to fear when he recalled, towards the end of the national conference, that the organization, if its wants to extend itself, cannot be made “of a lot of people integrated into professional life” (my tactical divergence from Barjot on this point will be that of recalling that this organization cannot “extend itself” again, but can only reconstitute itself).

To conclude:

Given the absence of tendencies in *Pouvoir Ouvrier* on the questions that appear really central to me, and considering that this fact renders the entirety of the organization responsible

for a functioning that isn't imposed upon it bureaucratically, I have voted, in so far as I'm a delegate to the conference, for the pure and simple continuation of the old Editorial Committee.

Given my opposition, explained above, to the organization as it is today, I find myself obliged to withdraw from it (all the more, I must bear in mind my situationist comrades, a question that has never been broached by *Pouvoir Ouvrier* since the departure of Canjuers,³ but which doesn't remain any less real for that). I specify, if all this can have some usefulness, that I haven't spoken from a Lefortist perspective; but from the necessity of a really effective organization (not the utopia in which certain members of *Pouvoir Ouvrier* believe). And not in favor of some privatization, either; but against the role of private life uncritiqued in the organization or, symmetrically, outside of it – as illusory compensation for its unsatisfied militants.

Please believe, comrades, in my deep sympathy for you in any case and for all that, in your action, goes towards the deepening of your program and its translation into action.

Guy

³ The pseudonym of Daniel Blanchard. In 1960, he and Debord (who had just joined the group) authored "Préliminaires pour une définition de l'unité du programme révolutionnaire," which was intended to foster a productive discussion between the Situationist International and *Pouvoir Ouvrier*. It was published in Paris in July 1960.