

Letter from Guy Debord to Robert Chasse

23 December 1967¹

Dear Robert:

I have just received your letter of 20 December. It is very fortunate that we have stopped the “escalation” of bad feelings! The atmosphere of misunderstanding, it seems to me, has already dissipated. What remains is a theoretical and “technical” discussion of our organizational practice. Thus I herein immediately abandon subordinate discussions, for example, discussions about *certain* translations. We can combine with this discussion an examination of the recent history between New York, London, and Paris (because this second aspect is a good concrete illustration of the first problem). In the meantime, you will receive our letter of 21 December (and the three adjoined copies indicating a series of “linked” breaks).²

I too am responding immediately. Thus, we will avoid the slightly “administrative” style that collectively drafted letters inevitably have, and always with a certain haste: because each of our meetings must produce and dispatch a quite large number of letters – and also deal with other problems, with the result that this work frequently lasts all night. But, for all that, this isn’t a “personal” letter: I think that it summarizes our recent conclusions, and I will transmit a copy, with your response, to the next meeting of our friends (today almost all of whom are dispersed across Europe to accomplish diverse tasks).

First of all, let’s speak of our theory of “coherent and democratic” organization. As you know, we are not interested in an abstract theory. Thus, this theory is the theory of *our own practice* as the Situationist International *until now*. This theory is certainly modifiable and *surpassable*, but always by a conscious collective decision, and not by the arbitrary action of someone who puts us in the presence of a *fait accompli*. We define this practice – ever since the beginning of the SI and up to and including the current period – as the task of an extreme avant-garde that does not aim at transforming itself in the direction of a large revolutionary movement that is beginning to constitute itself. We think that the first effort, faced with the new era of contestation that *spontaneously* begins everywhere, is to produce the most adequate critical theory (thus helping to free spontaneous movements from the *inconsequence* that makes them mix *their own truth* with a certain dose of old ideological lies). To produce this theory is neither possible nor desirable without a practical conduct that is also “exemplary.” Without insisting on our own praiseworthiness, we are quite sure that we have been able to *begin* the formulation of a new theoretical rigor, [but] *only* to the extent that we’ve known how to defend an equal rigor in our practical attitude. We must avoid all *recuperation* in the “spectacle” and all concessions to confusionism. Tony [Verlaan], although he’d only met with us for a short time before leaving Europe [for New York in February 1967], can already testify to you how people here try to approach the situationists (or “recruit” for us or speak in our name) with objectively

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² Letters of 21 December 1967 to Morea and Bookchin, plus the letter to all the sections of the SI dated 21 December 1967.

compromised intentions. Tony can also tell you how we strongly resist this. In other words: we ten times over refuse a “success” that would assuredly be an alienation, so as to finally attain a success that we really desire. At this stage, the individuals in the SI must have sufficient *ability* to be autonomous (for example, to not be mere “partisans” of theories that they themselves are unable to develop and apply). And, simultaneously, the small number of individuals who have known equal participation at this level of “coherence” find themselves collectively engaged by what each one of them is constrained to decide immediately and on his own in the name of our shared principles (likewise, someone in the SI who fights our shared principles engages and compromises me in a refutation of myself: such a person must be excluded to protect our seriousness). This is done to make it understood that a publicly announced break with an external person by one of us (for reasons concerning the SI and at that level, quite obviously) obliges us to immediately adopt this break *or* exclude the situationist whose action we do not want to approve (if this act was manifestly a betrayal or an abuse of our general demands, which have been made well known by our writings).

How do we make our majority decisions? Straight off, one must note that there are very few *votes*. When we must make a choice concerning a problem – generally tactical – the bases that we share make it so that, after a discussion, the solution that appears to be the best almost always rallies unanimity. Nevertheless, certain cases can only be settled – before being decided upon by experience itself – by adopting the majority opinion. Let’s envision a case in which there is disagreement and a vote (this is what inevitably takes place each time the SI’s bases of agreement are put into question; thus, in all instances of [proposed] exclusion or break). Until now, we have had the comfort that the group is numerically limited, and we have had the difficulty that this same group is geographically quite dispersed. We make decisions during meetings or a series of meetings, an exchange of letters or delegates (if a delegate is unfaithful to his mandate, he is excluded, naturally). This material difficulty obviously requires that no one – except in cases of *new facts* – puts into question the commitments that he made after discussion. But this difficulty is, at the same time, *normally* greatly diminished by the fact that we have a confidence in each other that is based upon a good knowledge of the proven abilities of each of us in the rigorous handling of theoretical and practical matters. We are all quite in agreement with you on the fact that the way we function will be different when the situationists number in the hundreds. But here I recall our collectively defined task: we do not want to transform ourselves into a political party (thus, for some time now, we could easily admit into our ranks more than a hundred individuals *in France*, and this wouldn’t be desirable). We must create – at the limit, in each country – a nucleus capable of accomplishing the same “extreme avant-garde” task that we have only begun to approach in two or three European countries. (It is also obvious that in the *moment* of the development of a profound revolutionary movement, the SI must still solve other problems concerning modalities of action, which are problems that are now hardly touched upon by our discussions, because in no case will we lay claim to a leadership role in the movement, neither from outside nor from within). Thus, one can say, due to what’s taken place, that at the moment when there are a hundred members of the SI, they will inevitably be spread over five or six countries. The relations of “autonomous individuals” would *then* take place through the mediation of active groups. At the moment, it is obvious that each one of these groups would have to resolve for itself the problem of democratic decision-making concerning its activity, and [must do so] on the basis of the general accord between all the groups. The most “universal” questions would then have to be debated at the general conferences of all the groups, at which – everyone not being able to attend – we will have to keep track of how many mandates

are represented by the participants (one can also make known one's positions in writing, but nothing is better than direct dialogue). With the appearance of "America" among our practical problems, we already find ourselves confronted with the premises of the question of the liaisons between distant groups. We must discuss this question and define the practical forms at our next conference, which we think will be held in 1968.³ From now on, it is all the same clear that we will not ask you, if you find a third or fourth comrade in the USA,⁴ to send them on a tour of Europe so as to meet and be accepted by all the others here! By contrast, on the problem of your "membership" in the SI, the current situationists must make a pronouncement, as a unique group, following the currently existing rules of our game, following our general principles of agreement and – yes, for all that! – following the expression of your own desires.

It is here that begins the history between us since Raoul [Vaneigem]'s trip to New York and the series of difficulties that we have now become fully aware of. I will now return to this question, chronologically, briefly concerning the points that you already know from the preceding letters and in a more detailed fashion concerning the points that are new.

A little before Raoul's trip, I went to England: Donald [Nicholson-Smith] and Chris [Gray] had the same opinion as we did (see below) on this question. Raoul was delegated *without any other instructions* than those which were on the piece of paper that he read to you. We only recommended to him that he *at first* make contact with you, which he did upon disembarking. Because we know *all* the serious weaknesses of Murray [Bookchin]'s behavior (having seen him at work in Paris) and, on the other hand, we all estimated – the English situationists included – that, as a result of the letters exchanged with you, that you were the New Yorker who was the closest to our positions. *No one* proposed to limit Raoul's freedom by demanding that he have discussions with everyone (or by demanding that he meet, for example and precisely, [Ben] Morea, independently of the conditions that Raoul might find and judge by directly seeing the state of the problem in New York). I saw Raoul before his departure and transmitted the opinion of the English situationists to him.

Here is our collective opinion at the moment (already expressed in the document that Raoul brought you). We thought that after so many translations, and especially after *the opening of a post office box in the name of the SI* in New York,⁵ which obviously involved our responsibility, and for which we had *no guarantee at all*, it was urgent to discover with whom we could be in agreement and *in contact with* in New York. (We are agreed on the fact that "prospective" = possible: the other *possible* members of the SI do not engage our responsibility through their unilaterally decided public actions.) We were particularly disquieted by the fact that Tony did not maintain the least contact with us *for several months*. When he finally wrote us a long letter, he said that he had kept in useful contact with London, something that Chris strongly denies.

When Raoul returned to Paris, before departing on another voyage (which meant that we couldn't reconsider new *details* in his presence for the next two weeks) – and making his exposition on New York, he had naturally spoken much more about his agreement with Tony

³ The Eighth Conference wouldn't take place until 1969 (25 September to 1 October) in Venice. [*Translator*: all the members of the newly formed American section were in attendance.]

⁴ *Translator*: eventually there would be four: Robert Chasse, Bruce Elwell, Tony Verlaan, and Jonathan Horelick.

⁵ *Translator*: this was done by Tony Verlaan, a Dutch student who encountered and assisted the situationists in Strasbourg in November-December 1966.

and you than about the corollary breaks, which were good things, but less important. Nevertheless, Raoul had insisted on the case of the mystic⁶ to demonstrate Morea's bankruptcy. (So that the problem is quite clear: there were many other serious disagreements that he *would have told* Morea about, if he had met him, and he even hesitated to meet a person of little interest who was already opposed to our friends, but, after the scandal with the mystic, he no longer wanted to meet Morea, and this wasn't *at all contradictory* with respect to the more theoretical critiques that you might make of Morea in the study of the "New Left.") I believe that I must remark here that the discussion with a mystic shocked us more than it appears to have shocked you.

Raoul said that the accord with you was sure and solid, but that you would prefer to wait until you'd completed your own theoretical text before you openly presented yourselves as "situationists." This preference seemed to him – and to us at the time of his report to the SI – to be an excellent procedure. *But* we understood this to be a simple *tactical* choice, secondary with respect to our "strategic" accord (tell us if Raoul is mistaken in this). Indeed, the evolution brought about by [our] tactical problems with New York have led us to accelerate the process. I am still speaking of *tactical* questions. Obviously, after your response of 10 December,⁷ we thought that there appeared to be a fundamental disagreement, not perceived by Raoul, that is, if you intended to have an "absolute American autonomy" that would not take account of the rest of the SI, but your letter of 20 December⁸ denied this hypothesis. Nevertheless, even after your letter of 10 December, which left us very skeptical about the chances of an accord with you – although we took allowances for your bad feelings due to our response to Morea – we were all absolutely resolved to no longer have discussions with anyone other than you. The break with Morea objectively imposed itself: whatever becomes of the discussion with you hereafter; you didn't have to "buy" us this break by proving us right about the whole line of our debate!

Here now is the continuation of the tactical problems that have arisen so quickly. I'd already written quite briefly to the English situationists about the (to us) fortunate conclusion of Raoul's trip. But, at the same time, they received Morea's first letter of protest. They immediately came to Paris: they regretted that Raoul had not agreed to meet Morea. We gave *the crudest* – and uncontested – argument by which Raoul had justified his choice. The English – to our astonishment – proposed suspending our decision until their own visits to New York had been made. We – once more the majority! – absolutely rejected any perspective that would be equivalent to disavowing Raoul. The English then insisted, with many qualms, on the fact that "perhaps Morea *did not know* why Raoul had to conduct himself with such violence" (they made use of the valid argument that we cannot count on Murray to faithfully transmit the reasons, even the most important ones, that Raoul had given him, or count on Hoffman either). Then we agreed to sign with them a letter to Morea to inform him of *a sufficient reason* for our refusal to enter into dialogue with him. We were *all in agreement* on the fact that contact with Morea could no longer take place, except if he were to immediately apologize for his collusion with the mystic *and for the insulting tone of his letter*. Almost all of us thought that this was absolutely improbable. Nevertheless, Chris said that, according to him, Morea is "honest" and that such a

⁶ *Translator*: Allan Hoffman, a member of the Black Mask group in New York, which produced ten issues of their journal between 1966 and 1967. See the collection *Black Mask and Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker* (1992). Hoffman seems to have been a peripheral figure in the group.

⁷ *Translator*: never published.

⁸ *Translator*: never published.

change of mind [on Morea's part] was not completely impossible (but Chris himself estimated that in no case need we envision an accord with him). Nevertheless, we did not want this slightly excessive manifestation of formalist scruples (naturally it is completely necessary to openly declare to someone our reasons for rejecting him, but in Morea's case it was more than probable that he already knew them quite well) – we did not want it to put back into question the irreversible choices made during Raoul's trip to New York. At the same time that the SI's response was to be made to Morea, we then demanded that it be immediately noted that *we are engaged with* Tony and you (and that it was no longer a question of still discussing things *indifferently* with the others). The English accepted this: thus came into existence the “administrative” document of December 5, which didn't much please you!

These were our reasons. They can be summarized this way: the appearance of publications issued in our name in New York pushed us to more quickly seek a precise accord with comrades in that city; then the *hostile reactions to this accord* (by Morea, for example) led us to bring about the *public formalization* of it. It was then up to you to choose, starting from there.

You know what followed. Morea only responded with new insults, and the English *wrote to him again* – breaking our agreement – in a manner that could leave one to believe that Raoul had lied by describing Hoffman as a mystic (which, of course, neither Donald nor Chris ever said in our discussions; they themselves knew, and also knew through Murray, that Hoffman is in fact a mystic).

Then we immediately had them break with Morea and Murray through letters: if not, we would do so *without them* and this would mean their break with us.

The English telegraphed us to ask for a supplementary discussion in London. Raoul went there with a text bearing an ultimatum and told them directly about his trip to New York. The English said straight off that they did not want to break with us. Thus, they began to write letters breaking with Murray and Morea, but the writing process appeared to be very difficult, because they found each phrase too violent! This effort, which didn't advance quickly, had to be pursued the next day. But when the next day came, the English didn't want to continue and raised *new problems*. Using your letter of 10 December as sufficient proof, they then declared that Raoul *had been wrong*, not only in breaking with Morea, but also in declaring that you were acceptable to the SI and especially that Tony *could not* be accepted! (I must note that they themselves had signed the letter of acceptance dated 5 December, and that they hardly knew Tony, less than I do and much less than Raoul, who had met with him for a long time in New York).

Raoul and René [Viénet] then declined to take part in the discussion. It had become obvious that this was no longer a question of a misunderstanding or a slowness in reasoning, but a *will to not understand*. Thus, we came to a definitive break; one can say that it wasn't produced as rapidly as our horrifying legend would have it: more than ten letters were exchanged; two trips were undertaken; and more than six days of discussion took place between the two “currents.”

What the three English comrades⁹ have done can be summarized as follows.

1) *From the beginning* and without any tenable reasons, they have systematically refrained from solidarity with all of Raoul's activity in New York (whereas all the other

⁹ *Translator*: Donald Nicholson-Smith, Christopher Gray and T.J. Clark. The *fourth* English situ, Charles Radcliffe, didn't figure in this affair at all.

situationists have affirmed that their confidence in Raoul, founded upon a multitude of experiences at all levels, is unassailable).

2) They have manifested a stupefying indulgence – comical and disgraceful – for Morea, his mystical acquaintances and his “methods of discussion.”

3) They have simultaneously affirmed an absolute and irrational hostility towards Tony and you. (I said that we all have critiques to formulate about Tony’s prior actions, but that – having learned since then of his complete agreement with you *and Raoul* – we could not accept that he should be metaphysically condemned for having neglected contact with us in the preceding period. We also recalled that his attitude during “the battle of Strasbourg”¹⁰ had been entirely honorable and rigorous.) If we had given in on such a clear and shocking refusal of solidarity, the SI would logically have to relent in ten other important external affairs in which we are simultaneously engaged, and even thereafter, as well! The radical function that we have had until now would be ended.

We regret the exclusion of Donald, whom we like very much. For two years, while he was in Paris, we had always been in complete agreement with him. He only became “English” again *in the last two months* so as to help found an “English group” that – for 18 months – hadn’t been able to surpass the stage of making translations,¹¹ because this group was only composed of Chris (and, episodically, one other person: [Charles] Radcliffe had rigorously *done nothing* for 18 months¹² and finally had amicably formulated his resignation to Chris several months before this affair). We find it quite strange that the atmosphere of this “virtual group” so rapidly altered Donald’s rigor in reasoning and even his understanding of the meaning of dignity.

I must emphasize that, after our first discussion ended in an accord with Chris and Ch. Radcliffe, we still *were completely confident* in the English situationists (which seems quite normal to us), *without in any manner ever supervising* what they did in England. And then, upon their *first intervention* in a general debate, we found out that they truly did not feel bound to have the same confidence in Raoul and the others! A useful lesson.

We still do not clearly understand their intentions in this affair (but the continuation of their own activity *will not fail to reveal them*).¹³ No opposition to any of our theses or perspectives was ever indicated. We can only find this one point, hardly mentioned in ten minutes, and quite recently: Chris said that England and the USA had to be considered *as a single terrain of action*, with the same publications, a single journal, etc. I responded that this idea didn’t seem very realistic to me. But we hardly see how such a barely sketched-out “theoretical” divergence could lead to a break in practical solidarity 15 days later.

There is a lot of other European news that might be interesting (the most notable: the filing of criminal charges against us in Paris for incitement to theft, crime and debauchery due to

¹⁰ *Translator*: the publication of *On the Poverty of Student Life* using funds diverted from the student union.

¹¹ *Translator*: but there was a document that surfaced many years later, written in 1967, titled *The Modern Art of Revolution and the Revolution of Modern Art*.

¹² *Translator*: since the publication of *Heatwave #2* in October 1966.

¹³ *Translator*: though the English group collapsed, each of its members continued to be devoted fans and practitioners of situationist theory: Gray and Nicholson-Smith as translators, Clark and Nicholson-Smith as writers, and Radcliffe as an editor.

the *comics*¹⁴ that you know about – and the recent scandal of the pro-SI students in Rennes,¹⁵ which restarts the Strasbourg process). But this letter is already quite long enough.

Best wishes,
Guy

P.S. Tell us when you have received Raoul's book and mine. If not, we will send them in a more discrete way.

¹⁴ *Translator*: English in original. The comics that announced the publication of *Internationale Situationniste* #11.

¹⁵ It was in fact Nantes, not Rennes. See letter to Yvon Chotard dated 17 December 1967.