

# Letter from Guy Debord to Patrick Straram

## 10 October 1960<sup>1</sup>

**Dear Patrick:**

I will respond at length, over several days, to your letter and the documents received via boat.

In haste, I respond here to your airmailed letter concerning the *Declaration on the right to insubordination in the Algerian war*.

Published in the first days of September [1960], this text basically expresses – there are several anomalies in it, some more interesting, some even more lukewarm – the habitual tendencies of today’s “Leftist intellectuals,” that is to say, those people who have been the worst enemies of all revolutionary research (the Sartres, Nadeaus, Mascolos and re-heated surrealists). But in the exceptional ambiance of the Gaullist regime, the obviousness of the colonial war [in Algeria] that can’t be ended by gestures of good will from the Prince, and also the obviousness of the decomposition of all Leftist organizations, these people have, for the first time, clearly and courageously placed themselves in a position of pure scandal (as we say: artistic scandal, in the sense of the best gestures of surrealism in its halcyon era). Meanwhile, it is still the same “Leftist club,” although complicated by certain particular maneuvers made by several representatives of other currents (Leftist Christian moralists and “frontists” who are unconditionally placed at the disposition of the *leadership* of the FLN and who anticipate – incorrectly, it seems to me – the imminent formation of Maquis in France). This aspect of an “exclusive club” that is dominated by small obstructions (anti-situationists, also: they expend a lot of effort to surround us with silence) is reflected by the fact that no one invited us to sign a text that presents itself as a general gathering of free artists and writers. I couldn’t even read it.

Because the government responded with several indictments, a new wave of signatories was added very quickly (Sagan, etc.; one very quickly approaches around 180 names). This has produced the turning point in the repression: panic-stricken and trying to stop the movement at all costs, the government carries itself to extremes. The crime of provoking the military to acts of insubordination and desertion, which used to be punishable by at most six months in prison, is now by ordinance punishable by three years in prison, without retroactive effect on the 121 original plus 60 additional recorded signatures, but officially intended to discourage subsequent ones. Moreover, all the authors and actors who signed are prohibited from appearing or even *being mentioned* on the radio or TV. This includes subsidized theatres and the near-totality of French cinema, of which the economic existence depends on the good will of the State (grants, advances, or quite simply censorship ratings – this last point hasn’t been explicitly mentioned, but it is no doubt in all cases a means of economic pressure even worse than the others).<sup>2</sup>

It is in this atmosphere that one has finally decided to appeal for our solidarity: returning late one evening from London – where the [situationists’] conference had made us stay for eight exhausting but good days – I found this appeal and immediately sent it off, signed by Michèle

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<sup>1</sup> Published in *Guy Debord, Correspondance*, Volume 2, septembre 1960 – décembre 1964 (Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2001). Translated by Bill Brown and uploaded to the *NOT BORED!* website (notbored.org) in 2005. Footnotes by Alice Debord, except where noted.

<sup>2</sup> In the margin: “*Note*: also the suspension of all civil servants, with reduction to one-fourth of their salaries.”

[Bernstein] and I (the humor of the thing is that, if the SI has, by definition, always been excluded from TV, etc., Michèle, on the contrary, insofar as she is the young author of a “fake novel,” was able to give a very remarkable interview, which radically placed in question the rules of this small game).<sup>3</sup>

The conditions in which I had the text in hand didn’t allow me to make a copy of it – no French journal has published it, by the way.

I only noted the end of it, which I give you here. The rest is a long exposition that one can reproach for a certain *political* confusion, but which is, on the whole, very firm and perfectly honorable ethically.

The undersigned, considering that each person must take a stand concerning acts that are henceforth impossible to present as minor news items of interest only to a few individuals; considering that, whatever their location and whatever their means, they have the moral obligation to intervene, not in order to give advice to men who have to make their own decisions concerning such serious problems, but to ask of those who judge them that they not let themselves get caught up in the ambiguity of words and values, declare:

-- We respect and judge justified the refusal to take up arms against the Algerian people.

-- We respect and judge justified the conduct of the French people who consider it their obligation to provide aid and protection to the Algerians, who are oppressed in the name of the French people.

-- The cause of the Algerian people, which contributes in a decisive way to the ruination of the colonial system, is the cause of all free men.

Since then, I have reason to think that we are, in total, around 250 signatories.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps more? In any case, hardly less than that. The enterprise appears disorganized by the police raids

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Pierre Dumayet, concerning the publication of *All the King's Horses*, in August 1960, in the framework of his broadcast “Reading for Everyone.”

<sup>4</sup> *Translator*: here are their names: Arthur Adamov, Robert Antelme, Georges Auclair, Jean Baby, Hélène Balfet, Marc Barbut, Robert Barrat, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Louis Bedouin, Marc Beigbeder, Robert Benayoun, Maurice Blanchot, Roger Blin, Arsène Bonnefous-Murat, Geneviève Bonnefoi, Raymond Borde, Jean-Louis Bory, Jacques-Laurent Bost, Pierre Boulez, Vincent Bounoure, André Breton, Guy Cabanel, Georges Condominas, Alain Cuny, Dr Jean Dalsace, Jean Czarnecki, Adrien Dax, Hubert Damisch, Bernard Dort, Jean Douassot, Simone Dreyfus, Marguerite Duras, Yves Ellouet, Dominique Eluard, Charles Estienne, Louis-René des Forêts, Dr Théodore Fraenkel, André Frénaud, Jacques Gernet, Louis Gernet, Edouard Glissant, Anne Guérin, Daniel Guérin, Jacques Howlett, Edouard Jaguer, Pierre Jaouen, Gérard Jarlot, Robert Jaulin, Alain Joubert, Henri Krea, Robert Lagarde, Monique Lange, Claude Lanzmann, Robert Lapoujade, Henri Lefebvre, Gérard Legrand, Michel Leiris, Paul Lévy, Jérôme Lindon, Eric Losfeld, Robert Louzon, Olivier de Magny, Florence Malraux, André Mandouze, Maud Mannoni, Jean Martin, Renée Marcel-Martinet, Jean-Daniel Martinet, Andrée Marty-Capgras, Dionys Mascolo, François Maspero, André Masson, Pierre de Massot, Jean-Jacques Mayoux, Jehan Mayoux, Théodore Monod, Marie Moscovici, Georges Mounin, Maurice Nadeau, Georges Navel, Claude Ollier, Hélène Parmelin, José Pierre, Marcel Péju, André Pieyre de Mandiargues, Edouard Pignon, Bernard Pingaud, Maurice Pons, J.-B. Pontalis, Jean Pouillon, Denise René, Alain Resnais, Jean-François Revel, Paul Revel, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Christiane Rochefort, Jacques-Francis Rolland, Alfred Rosner, Gilbert Rouget, Claude Roy, Marc Saint-Saëns, Nathalie Sarraute, Jean-Paul Sartre, Renée Saurel, Claude Sautet, Jean Schuster, Robert Scipion, Louis Seguin, Geneviève Serreau, Simone Signoret, Jean-Claude Silbermann, Claude Simon, René de Solier, D. de la Souchère, Jean Thiercelin, Dr René Tzanck, Vercors, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, J.-P. Vielfaure, Claude Viseux, Ylipe, René Zazzo.

(the arrest of Robert Barrat)<sup>5</sup> and certain divisive maneuvers, such as the much more moderate and “Third Force” appeals to public opinion launched by other people, including that scoundrel Edgar Morin.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the blows struck by the enemy, one must consider that the fundamental blunders and hesitations of the organizers of the thing, before the repression, were harmful. Thus, rather than vaguely hoping to re-launch the declaration so as to get signatories from the factories – which would make it appear that we are a ridiculous minority – the fundamental problem, it appears to me, is, on the contrary, to constitute, *as a dominant force* on the terrain of struggle maladroitly opened up by the government, an *all-out war between the intelligentsia and the government*. It is this that would have the biggest effect abroad, where the war is the most strongly denounced and which could be better at bringing fire to the powder, if there is in fact any powder.

Which means: a boycott of [French] TV, radio, the National Film Center, etc. This is the position of essential dignity and elemental liberty that has been taken up by a certain number of critics, producers, etc. This is the point upon which one could gather together the technicians of the spectacle (especially in the cinema, where team spirit is real and where there is little separation between the director and his team, and even among the actors), the bourgeois intellectuals “worthy of the name,” and the capitalists of the spectacle (producers).

I have spoken of this possibility with Henri Lefebvre (the only one of the 121 [original signatories] with whom I’m in contact, for previously existing reasons). He also thinks that this would be the best, but we are not very sure that this choice will impose itself.

The question of more or less advanced clandestinity is posed here. I don’t know where *Internationale situationniste* #5 will appear. I have already concealed certain papers at a more secure address. We are in one of those moments of political hesitation (can the government put the machine into reverse, provisionally?) in which anything can happen, or not. On top of that, since my return from England on the 29th of September and up until yesterday, I have been working non-stop on the shooting of a short film (an experimental documentary) called *Critique of Separation*. The obligation to work on it 14 or 15 hours a day has greatly handicapped me.

Soon I’ll send more specific responses.

In friendship, always,

Guy

P.S. Enclosed are several postage stamps for you to send, if possible, several copies of the journal<sup>7</sup> directly to the addresses that I have provided (first of all: one for me, one for *Maurice Wyckaert, Hoogstraat 16, Alseberg, Belgium*).

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Barrat, a Catholic journalist who was incarcerated in September 1955 following the publication of a report on Algerian Maquis in *France-Observateur*, was arrested again in October 1960 in the offices of the journal *Esprit* for his active participation in the *Declaration on the right to insubordination in the Algerian war*.

<sup>6</sup> In its bulletin *Public Education*, the Federation of National Education (FNE) published a petition that, due to its moderation, drew a large number of signatories, among them Roland Barthes, Jean-Marie Domenach, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Claude Lefort, Edgar Morin and Paul Ricoeur (cf. “The Minute of Truth,” *I.S.* #5, p. 5).

<sup>7</sup> *Translator*: Straram’s *Cahier pour un paysage à inventer* (*Notebook for a landscape to be invented*), which was published in Montreal in May 1960.

Sure enough, from Paris, Portugais<sup>8</sup> sent me your letter dated 26 September. Since then, he hasn't made any gesture towards joining us. In these conditions, I don't think that one can trust him with relaying communications between us.

I have asked [André] Frankin<sup>9</sup> to send you the complete text of the *Déclaration*, from Belgium, if, as I believe, he has a copy of it.

I have sent you the tract that we issued – on a very moderate terrain – in favor of A. Trocchi,<sup>10</sup> following the mandate of the conference of the SI in London. Attached is the SI's firmer and more theoretical resolution<sup>11</sup> on the case of this comrade. Alex is one of the best men one could know. He'd returned from Mexico, and was on his way to see us, when this unfortunate story unexpectedly broke out. It was only after his long voyage in America that he no longer took a very visible role in the action of the SI. I know no one in whom I have more confidence. The cops have gathered that he came to buy heroin: he had cocaine and marijuana on him. The accusation of trafficking fell apart, one tells me, because there was only one buyer. But, merely for consumption, he faces two years in jail. He is in Sing-Sing.<sup>12</sup>

It is agreed that you should sign "Preliminaries."<sup>13</sup> And I'm happy about that. *One last point*: are you sure about the internment of Ivan?<sup>14</sup> I have heard this for several months, but I haven't believed it. At this moment, Sacha (Strelkoff) affirms to me that he met him, free, less than three months ago. Thus, this will have to be verified. If it is true, then naturally I am ready for all useful steps.

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<sup>8</sup> Louis Portugais, Canadian filmmaker, collaborator [with Straram] on the *Cahier pour un paysage à inventer*.

<sup>9</sup> *Translator*: a member of the SI.

<sup>10</sup> *Hands Off Alexander Trocchi*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *I.S.* #5, p. 14. [*Translator*: "The Minute of Truth."]

<sup>12</sup> Sing-Sing, the state prison situated in Ossining, Westchester County, New York.

<sup>13</sup> "Preliminaries Towards Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program," P. Canjuers and G.-E. Debord, published 20 July 1960.

<sup>14</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov.