

Letter from Guy Debord to Raoul Vaneigem

19 June 1963¹

Dear Raoul:

And so we continue this exchange of clarifications, despite the fact that a certain supplementary confusion is introduced, I believe, by the rapid style of these letters (I see that mine haven't been explicit enough on several points): confusion and misunderstandings that direct dialogue certainly would have kept away, in order to arrive at the really open questions.

All the same, I believe that, in the meantime, we can still clear the terrain by writing.

First of all, it appears that we both think that membership in the SI (the fact of being a situationist in practice) is inseparable from a certain *capability*. This "capability" obviously cannot be defined *a priori* because it is, *to a certain extent*, fluid and partially different in each of those people engaged in this complex task; because it is *historical* and varies with different stages of our action; and finally because it isn't a question of envisioning it as *entirely given* among each of our interlocutors. No more is it a question of expecting the SI to completely, or even to a quite large extent, providing each interlocutor with this capability. The SI can only dialogue on the basis of an already possible practical dialogue, and cannot become an "elementary school," if only because *there are other urgent tasks* – and more pleasant ones, too.

This accord between us – and, I think, all the current members of the SI – raises the following question: what are the five or six forms of immediate action in the first rank of the SI's preoccupations? I don't want to say that we still have the leisure of defining them by pure speculation or by *brainstorming*.² I suppose that this exercise will lead us all to be more clearly conscious of the fact that we already have in hand two or three forms of engaged action which are necessary to pursue; perhaps there is one that it is necessary to cease; perhaps there are still one or two to choose from among three or four new ones that we have in mind. We will obviously derive a provisional definition of "capacity" from these specific responses.

We again take up the question of the clashes within the SI, which I see – now that a certain level has been attained: cf. the [metaphorical] death of Nash,³ etc. – as entirely dependent on this first open question (even the crisis concerning Uwe⁴ is directly a debate on the methods of practical activity). I would like to say right away that, to me, it goes without saying that no one can "demand justifications or give them," as you've written. On the contrary, I consider this discussion to be an elementary outline, which serves to describe and comprehend the functioning – and the dysfunctions – of an organization that is less spread out but more complicated than the classic revolutionary party. One can more veritably reconstruct these anecdotes by naming A, B or X as the occasional carriers of diverse attitudes.

This is to say that I don't think that there are wounds that must be washed in water, fresh or otherwise. And it even appears to me that, in an adventure such as this one – given the very

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² *Translator*: English in original.

³ *Translator*: Jørgen Nash, a member of the Scandinavian section, excluded in 1962.

⁴ *Translator*: Uwe Lausen, a member of the German section, excluded in 1965.

strong disintegrating pressures that come from a hostile environment (the pincers of which you speak in “B. de B.”⁵) – all real wounds become gangrenous very quickly. Any small breach is fatal in the depths to which the submarine *Thresher* went (“We go beyond experimental depth”).⁶ One has a very impressive example of this in Gilles Ivain.⁷

Thus, it is all the more important to avoid “wounds.” To not let relations that are awkward settle in. Like you, I think that insolence is paired with exclusion, that the logical end of insolence is exclusion. All exclusions are reciprocal. But there is also a relation of forces in this reciprocity (who is right?). It is a question of *having the means for his or her insolence* (which surely means: having a justification for it). Thus I approve, more than anyone else, the insolence of the SI against the world, its refusal, the exclusion of so many people (in fact, a very small number is composed of “excluded” people in the sense of “former situationists”). On the other hand, hypothetically, among us, this insolence is useless and harmful. Except, of course, if it goes along with the development of a program that is opposed (on the central points) to our known communal program to date (then this insolence would be justified, for “good” or “bad,” it is of little importance here).

This said, the point where we seem to disagree is when you propose an alternative between accepting everything (more or less “in the name of the SI”) or kill outright. For my part, I certainly refuse such an alternative: I would kill the fewest number of people possible (in all of the metaphorical and concrete meanings of the word) and, at the same time, I want to do or submit to the least possible number of things that displease me. And this in the SI as well as in the external world. This contradiction, I think, is posed and settled, more or less fortunately, in the different moments in the practice of life, and also in this action that we want to be revolutionary.

Tied to this opposition – and, without doubt, even producing it – is the different manners in which we define insolence and intersubjective clashes.

In your recent letter, you define insolence as the moment at which “intersubjective clashes are carried to the degree of the absolute” (in fact, you reduce all manifestations of insolence to its supreme stage: exclusion. Thus, if I may dare to say so, we only have the right to refuse the conduct of others at the moment when it excludes us, and we don’t have any other weapon against than exclusion. What an equilibrium of terror!) For a long time, I haven’t seen “intersubjective clashes” worthy of the name, nor carried to the degree of the absolute. Nevertheless, I will call “insolence” – more or less benign or “excusable,” that is to say, notable as an indicator of dysfunction – inappropriate attitudes, let us say, slightly *unfriendly*. I believe that it is not necessary to pretend to encourage them, nor to submit to them, even temporarily, wherever they come from. The unfriendly style can only render the SI less interesting at its interior, and a bit ridiculous to external witnesses. We are all, and all “merit” being, judges of the most maladroit behavior of the [other] situationists. I do not pretend to reduce situationist

⁵ “Banalities de Base.” [*Translator*: Vaneigem’s “Basic Banalities,” published in two parts in *Internationale situationniste* #7 (April 1962) and #8 (January 1963). In Part II, Vaneigem writes, “Power contains the irreducible by isolating it. But such isolation cannot last; something has to give. The two pincers are, first, the threat of disintegration (insanity, illness, destitution, suicide), and second, remote-controlled therapeutics.”

⁶ Last radio message sent by the nuclear submarine *Thresher* (USA), which disappeared after plunging, with 129 men aboard, on 10 April 1963.

⁷ *Translator*: the pseudonym of Ivan Chtcheglov.

relations to a sentiment such as friendship: but, nevertheless, I believe that we will be lost in abstractions (more than ever) if we claimed to carry into the world the values of dialogue without the SI setting an example, at least through the friendships among the situationists (or any surpassing that is an enrichment of conventional amicable relations, not their casual liquidation).

In the end, I don't believe that anyone in the SI could actually use spectacular or sophisticated forms of communication (though we are sometimes constrained to use them in our discussions with the enemy). In any case, I don't reproach anyone for it. It seems to me that it is the lack of collective reflection on the *elementary* aspects of several of our problems that indubitably creates this irritating impression where several of our remarks are concerned. In saying this, I do not at all imply that I myself have developed this elementary reflection on the totality of the field of our activity.

Finally, the principal misunderstanding: in speaking of "specialists" in the SI, I absolutely do not have in mind *the trivial level*, where, for example, Martin⁸ and I "organized" the exposition at Odense⁹ (although obviously we must try to prevent these chance specializations from reinforcing themselves in the long run). And, fortunately, plenty of people other than Martin and myself have done many things in different degrees of our practice. The publication of *Der Deutsche Gedanke*,¹⁰ even if it has been very hard work, is (will be) a very important contribution from Belgium: and we will all celebrate.

Where this is concerned: it is a question of assuring, without delay, the distribution of the *review copies* of this much-delayed journal. I hope that you have arranged this without too much difficulty. Here [in Denmark], so that all of the documents of the current exposition are shipped at great expense, we must behave a bit like gangsters. It seems that this will be effective. Laugeson¹¹ has rejoined us, and one says that Rudi¹² is on the way.

I don't believe that I can go to Belgium immediately after my return to Paris, which is becoming very urgent.

I will be in Paris immediately before the 28th [of June 1963], but on the 28th, unfortunately, I must leave again in the early afternoon. Can you come the evening of the 27th (Thursday) or the 26th?

Best wishes,
See you soon,
Guy

⁸ *Translator*: J.V. Martin, a member of the Scandinavian section.

⁹ *Translator*: "Destruction of the RSG-6," 22 June to 7 July 1963, at the Exi Gallery, Odense, Denmark.

¹⁰ *Translator*: issue #1 of this "Organ of the Situationist International for Central Europe," edited by Raoul Vaneigem, was published in April 1963.

¹¹ Peter Laugeson, a situationist in the Scandinavian section.

¹² *Translator*: Rudi Renson, a Belgian situationist who would in fact be prevented by the authorities from crossing into Denmark.