

Postface to the Dutch translation of Gianfranco Sanguinetti's book *On Terrorism and the State*

by Els van Daele¹

In Holland, in a region among the least impoverished, the most moderate and the most “democratized” in this poisoned world, where one can get together to criticize the quality of the heroin, and where pneumatic drills that have chased away the inhabitants are subsequently displayed, with the graffiti that denounces them, in the city’s subways like works of art – here in Holland as well as elsewhere the taste to follow the excellent example of our Italian comrades grows: “their absenteeism; their wildcat strikes that no particular concession can appease; their lucid refusal of work; their scorn for the law and all the Statist political parties” (Guy Debord, *Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of “The Society of the Spectacle”*). Here as elsewhere the conditions that render life impossible for us force us to struggle – to engage in the only struggle in which it is still worth the difficulty of investing our talents and in which the possibilities of deploying these talents are infinite. Therefore, if we want to bring this struggle to a good end, it is necessary to know the enemy’s weapons, and their uses, so as to turn them against it, or at least reduce those weapons to impotence.

Dutch commentators aren’t more innocent than their Italian colleagues, but they are completely indifferent towards the truth. And it goes without saying that, among us as well, all politicians and union leaders lie to the same extent that the industrialists make profits by selling lime as insecticide, and insecticide as food, because, here and there, the truth serves them so little. Moreover, no one knows how to discern the truth any longer, with the exception of the comrades who think on the basis of a proletarian perspective and who have nothing to lose and everything to gain in it. It is for them that I have translated this book.

And to please these comrades even more, to provide all suitable clarity to the theses that are defended here with so much verve, but not always with as much precision, we originally intended to introduce them with Debord’s *Preface*, as translated by Jaap Kloosterman. Sometimes Sanguinetti’s book gives the impression that its author needs to persuade himself of the validity of his own theses, which the author of *The Society of the Spectacle* did not need to do. As there are a large number of confluences between these two books, from the choices of historical examples to certain stylistic details – from which one could deduce a close collaboration² – the pages of the *Preface* that deal with the same aspect of the class struggle, on the same terrain, and at the same time, might seem to the reader to be a summary of *On Terrorism*, but the same disturbances are in fact analyzed in it with a method and a rigor that are lacking in Sanguinetti’s exposition. By contrast, the *Preface* lacks – and this is very good – the

¹ Dated 1 May 1981 and published in *Over het terrorisme en de staat : de theorie en praktijk van het terrorisme voor het eerst wereldkundig gemaakt* (Bussum: Wereldvenster, 1982). Translated into French and published in *Editions Champ Libre, Correspondance, Vol. 2*, (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1981). Translated from the French by Bill Brown and uploaded to the *NOT BORED!* website (notbored.org) in 2012. Footnotes as indicated. All comments [in brackets] by the translator.

² *Author*: we recall that these two authors co-signed the principle text in *The Veritable Split* and that Debord translated Censor’s *Truthful Report* [from Italian into French]. [*Translator*: “Censor” was the pseudonym under which Sanguinetti published the *Truthful Report on the Last Chances to Save Capitalism in Italy* (1975).]

laborious and abstract schemas in which Sanguinetti believes he must and can classify *all terrorism*. By limiting himself to speaking of the maneuvers of the Red Brigades, in general, and the execution of Moro, in particular, “Gianfranco Sanguinetti shelters *On Terrorism and the State* from all critique (...) To speak of the RBs as an extension of the Italian secret services indeed no longer appears well founded,” as a comrade in Paris has noted.³ Without concerning himself with history, Sanguinetti banishes [from his analysis] the many forms of terrorism that, in our century alone, have been and are still employed, not only by the State or by the mafia, but also by the most implacable enemies of the State and political economy, as much offensively as defensively, as *one* weapon in the struggle.⁴ By only implicating *State* terrorism in his critique (the ETA and the IRA want to conquer the State, while the RBs and GRAPO exist to defend it), and by presenting this critique as a *general* one, Sanguinetti – at the beginning of the 10th chapter of his *Remedy for Everything*⁵ – places all armed struggle in a bad light, and, by further developing several nuances, he only manages to contradict himself and to unintentionally demonstrate that his schema is defective. “This schema cannot be vaguely imputed to an error in judgment. It finds its truth in an active policy of wait-and-see (‘I would consider myself *hardly practical* . . .’) that Sanguinetti sets up as the *non plus ultra* of the revolutionary attitude that is not possessed by the ‘bad workers’ to whom his book is dedicated” (*Rien qu’on pion*). And yet the author loudly demands to be in the first position as *the* “specialist” in the denunciation of Italian State terrorism, today and in the future.

But it so happens that he was already not up to this pretention when he formulated it – because of what we can read in a letter written by Guy Debord to Jaap Kloosterman on 23 February 1981:

After the end of our organizational links in 1972, for several years I maintained a very close collaboration with Gianfranco on several projects and very good personal relations [as well]. But all this is over. At the moment that Moro was kidnapped, I wrote to Gianfranco⁶ and revealed the truth of this entire affair,

³ *Author: Rien qu’un pion sur l’échiquier*, anonymous tract published in Paris, February 1981. [*Translator*: is it not remarkable that Ms. van Daele not only knows about this tract, but has a copy of it? Who thought it good to send her a copy of it? We can understand someone sending a copy to Jaap Kloosterman, but why would he share it with her? Wouldn’t its contents be completely irrelevant to her work as a translator?]

⁴ *Author*: Thus, in Spain, apart from the ETA and GRAPO (which fulfill exactly the same function as the RBs in Italy), one has seen at work many autonomous libertarian groups that do not at all fit into the categories of Sanguinetti’s [concept of] terrorism, but that have, all the same, dynamited railroad lines and attacked businesses and banks. These groups have conceived of their actions in the much more fecund theoretical framework of *the armed struggle of the proletariat*. They have undertaken their operations as a part of, and as support for, the offensive strikes of Spanish workers, which especially marked the years 1976-1978. And these are groups that, in general, have taken up the most advanced [theoretical] positions. “One must not forget that the major part of the workers’ movement still scorns theory, considering it to be the work of intellectuals. By contrast, we scorn the ‘intellectuals’ who don’t have the passion to put revolutionary theory into practice, and never take up theory – which we make use of – against themselves. This is what we call theoretical expropriation” (see *Appels de la prison de Ségovia*, Paris, Champ Libre, November 1980). Before giving up the ghost, the last Spanish government in place before the military coup of 1981 was forced to free the guiltiest of these comrades, who were all in prison.

⁵ *Translator*: this was the book in which “On Terrorism and the State” was originally set to appear. When it proved impossible to publish it as a whole, Sanguinetti chose to publish this chapter as a standalone. Is it not odd that the translator refers to *Remedy to Everything* when the book she translated was always already called “On Terrorism and the State”?

⁶ *Translator*: letter dated 21 April 1978 and published in *Editions Champ Libre, Correspondance, Vol. 2*, (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1981).

advised him to reveal it [in Italy] immediately and, at the same time, go underground, since he was, in any case, in great danger, because the enemy knew that – having written *Censor* – he was probably the only one in Italy who *could* possibly reveal this truth at that very moment, that is to say, when the enemy absolutely didn't want to run this risk, when Moro was still alive, etc. (To reveal what had taken place once the affair was over, almost forgotten, and other spectacles had taken the stage, would only express 'an opinion,' although a dangerous one, certainly.) For reasons that have remained very obscure to me, Gianfranco *then* responded that my thesis – which he subsequently took up – was brilliant and ingenious, but *he* believed that it was true Leftists who then held Moro captive. Nevertheless, this was a belief that no slightly reasonable person, very up-to-date with the Italian situation until the day before these events, could entertain.

The idea that true Leftists had kidnapped Moro was a belief that no one in Holland alerted by *Censor* and having the occasion to read a few foreign newspapers could entertain, either.

And yet the author of *Censor*, who said to us on 16 March 1978 that he “has not been able to keep himself from thinking” that the kidnapping of Moro was the work of the Italian secret services, managed to prevent *other people* from subsequently choosing to reject this idea – and [so] once again the spectacle obtained its [desired] effect and succeeded in hiding the truth for as long as was necessary. The spectacle isn't only effective when it hides a secret or when one believes what it says; it is even more so when it is considered as an enigma to be resolved or when one doesn't know how to combat it. When Moro was kidnapped, Sanguinetti failed to intervene. And, in its turn, the fact of keeping his error hidden determined the course of all his subsequent actions. No doubt it was his bad conscience that dictated this promise to him: “As long as your State exists, and I am alive, I will never stop denouncing the terrorism of your parallel services, and no matter what,” but *post festum*.

It is certainly not by keeping such secrets that one obtains the position of fundamental superiority from which one “can attack and successfully combat all the forces of thoughtlessness” [and] *vanquish* them. And it is not by passing over in silence the fact that *someone else* had known these things, and known them so well, that one prevents the revelation of a truth of which one is ashamed. But what cruel irony it is that this revelation took place due to the fact that Dutch comrades wanted to add Debord's *Preface* to Sanguinetti's *On Terrorism*⁷ – the very *Preface* that Sanguinetti never mentioned, not even in the 1980 French edition of his book, which I have made use of, and which was subsequently reprinted unaltered! This singular maneuver was further clarified by a letter from Gérard Lebovici (Editions Champ Libre), dated 12 September 1980, on the subject of another French translation of *On Terrorism*⁸ that was sent to him in the hope of having it reprinted (a copy of this letter was sent to Sanguinetti).

As for the possibility of republication by Champ Libre, the comforting fact that the text has encountered a certain commercial success (as you have told me) has

⁷ *Author*: Debord's *Preface* would appear along with a Dutch translation of the film script for [Debord's 1978 film] *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*.

⁸ *Author*: There are two French translations of *On Terrorism*: one by Jean-François Martos, which I have made use of; and the other, which I haven't seen, was published in Grenoble. I only received a copy of Lebovici's letter a few weeks ago.

no importance here. Editions Champ Libre is entirely indifferent to all economic considerations, whether it is a question of gains or losses. And this is very fortunate, given the current centralization of book distribution, the servitude of the newspapers, the indigence of the bookstores, the boycott attempted from all sides, etc. (...) Moreover, I have previously seen the complete manuscript of *Remedy for Everything*. The part that has since been extracted by the author and translated by you is incontestably the most interesting. I know that Gianfranco Sanguinetti merits esteem for the unique courage he has shown by affirming in Italy a truth that the powers-that-be want to hide by every means possible. And I am happy that his words have caused many echoes in France and in many other countries, and will continue to do so in the future.

But in January 1976 I published the first non-Italian edition of *The Truthful Report*, which is an excellent and exemplary book. Naturally I cannot envision publishing a weaker and poorer book by the same author.

Sanguinetti deals with “the theory and practice of terrorism, developed for the first time” and clearly adds that his text permits his readers to “read it here, and only here.” It seems to me that Gianfranco Sanguinetti’s current firmness doesn’t at all authorize his glorious tone on this aspect of the question. I myself published, in *February* 1979 a little book in which someone already said all of the truths that Sanguinetti published in April of that same year (this work was immediately sent to him and a translation of it appeared in Italy in May [1979]). What’s more, I have photocopies of a correspondence exchanged while Moro was being held, still alive, between Sanguinetti and one of his foreign correspondents [Guy Debord]. This correspondent put him on guard by exposing the entire truth of the affair, and advised him to reveal it as soon as possible. At the time, Sanguinetti responded by resolutely declaring his skepticism concerning this version of the facts, or he only pretended to be so for reasons that remain obscure to me. When one has lost several months before wanting to admit the obvious, there is something out of place in insisting on one’s avant-gardist originality.

I find, therefore, that, from the point of view of Editions Cham Libre, the useful truths in *On Terrorism and the State* lack a bit of freshness.

We would be able to quite simply adopt this excellent position if this volume also included the *Truthful Report*, the two translations of *On Terrorism* and so many other books that Champ Libre could and wanted to publish; in sum, if, in this aspect, the conditions here [in Holland] weren’t so different from those in France. The valuable arguments and the useful truths gathered together in *On Terrorism* apropos of the machinations to which the Italian State has had recourse, the decree of its decadence, and what it has done have been almost unknown here, until now.

We can only congratulate ourselves with what will henceforth be available to all those people who read Dutch and, besides, with what – thanks to this Postface – are not only revealed State secrets, but also the secret of their revelation.⁹

⁹ *Author*: copies of this Postface have been sent to Gianfranco Sanguinetti, Guy Debord, Gérard Lebovici, Jaap Kloosterman and Jean-François Martos. [*Translator*: Sanguinetti responded to these insinuations in his letter to Mustapha Khayati (December 2012): “This postface, which was entirely or in part constructed by Guy, and which was imposed upon the Dutch publishers, isn’t the refutation of manipulative practices, as he claims, but their definitive and monumental confirmation. Likewise for the ‘Foreword’ imposed upon the English edition, which was

signed by Lucy Forsyth. [...] Both of these editions publish my text and, at the same time, launch an attack against my person (under the signatures of Els van Daele and Lucy Forsyth). This gives the impression that the book was only published so that their suspicions about and censures of its author could be spread.” In a footnote to this letter, we ourselves noted the following: “Sanguinetti’s assertion that it was in fact Debord who wrote and imposed both the ‘Postface’ to the Dutch edition and the ‘Foreword’ to the English edition certainly explains the otherwise inexplicable ‘coincidence’ that the two translations share, not only the same ideas, but the same way of phrasing them (as well as *the same excerpt* from Debord’s letter to Kloosterman dated 23 February 1981).” Debord certainly read, approved and *corrected* Els van Daele’s text before it was published. On 9 April 1981, he wrote to Jaap Kloosterman that, “I do not understand the problem with ‘translating El’s note into some kind of French.’ If you have doubts about the quality of the French employed, all you have to do is send me the first version, and I will send it back to you corrected.” Just over a month later, on 12 May 1981, Debord wrote to Kloosterman to say “Yesterday I sent you Els’ postface, which is exactly what needed to be done.”