

“Guy Debord, Reader of Marx and Hegel: Choices, Annotations, Détournements and Sources”

By Jean-Claude Leroy¹

“Hegel surpassed death (‘beginning of the life of the Spirit’) because he gave the meaning of the surpassing of finitude.”²

Here we have the third volume, in a series of five, of the entirety of Guy Debord’s reading notes, compiled under the direction of Laurence Le Bras³ for Éditions L’Échappée. They are quite beautiful volumes, edited with care, presented, annotated and commented upon, here by Anselm Jappe⁴ for the Marx part and Bertrand Cochard⁵ for the Hegel part. Marx and Hegel are the two names in gold letters on the front cover. Like many others of his time, Guy Debord made these two immense breakthroughs in the fields of analysis and foresight into his meal ticket. Their works have been read and re-read, as have been the many exegeses of them. From sources to confluences and from confluences to *La Société du spectacle*, enunciated and orchestrated ideas circulate and are transformed, up to and including our contemporary readings. To read Marx with Debord is also to read all those who came after Marx, for example, Georges Sorel, Henri Lefebvre, Maximilien Rubel, Georg Lukàcs and even Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky. And if, quite obviously, “Debord never identified Marxism with the Soviet doctrine,” as Anselm Jappe has made clear, just in case, he was in conformity with the opinion that was then beginning to be shared. In the same way, Debord, like a great many French intellectuals, was indebted to Kojève for his reading of Hegel; he was indebted to Lefebvre and to the Socialisme ou Barbarie group, with which he spent some time. But it was directly from the young Marx that he took the concept of “alienation,” which became “commodity fetishism,” “value,” “reification,” etc. It was also the relationship between society and the State that interested

¹ Jean-Claude Leroy, “*Guy Debord lecteur de Marx et de Hegel : choix, annotations, détournements, sources...*,” published by Mediapart on 29 June 2021: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-claude-leroy/blog/290621/guy-debord-lecteur-de-marx-et-de-hegel-choix-annotations-detournements-sources>. Translated by NOT BORED! 5 July 2021. All footnotes by the translator, except as indicated.

² Note by Jean-Claude Leroy: *La librairie de Guy Debord, Marx, Hegel* (Éditions L’Échappée, 2021), p. 424.

³ Ms. Le Bras (born 1976) is the curator of the Manuscript Department at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which purchased the Guy Debord Archives in 2011.

⁴ Anselm Jappe (born in Germany 1962) is the author of two books about Debord: *Guy Debord* (1991) and *L’avant-garde inacceptable - réflexions sur Guy Debord* (2004).

⁵ According to the website for Éditions L’Échappée, “Bertrand Cochard, Associate and Doctor of Philosophy, is a lecturer at the University of Côte d’Azur.”

Debord. He noted the rarity of moments in history when society was stronger than the State; Pierre Clastres and his works⁶ would come a little later.

When Debord read and re-read *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels), the same phrases turned up each time. An example: “Work is free in all the civilized countries; it isn’t a matter of liberating work, but of suppressing it.” That’s a line from page 200 of the 1948 Alfred Costes edition of the book: Debord had at least three opportunities to copy it down; he didn’t miss a single one.⁷

Concerning the détournements, of which Debord was a gifted enthusiast,⁸ there’s a text by Feuerbach in which we can read: “The exposition of philosophy must itself be philosophical.” Debord wrote in his synopsis of that text: “For ‘*Society of the Spectacle*’? this détournement: the exposition of the next revolution must itself be revolutionary.”⁹

At one moment, Debord noted: “For Rubel, Marx completely denied [the validity of] the State starting in 1843 by extending the Feuerbach critique through an ethical choice. For Henri Lefebvre, in *La Commune*, Marx found his position on the State after the experience of the Commune!”¹⁰

“When the mole digs into the interior, we must give an ear to its breakthrough and make it a reality.” It was Hegel who wrote that, quoted by Bruno Bauer in *Les trompettes du Jugement dernier contre Hegel, l’athée et l’antéchrist. Un ultimatum* (1841).¹¹ An end-of-volume note¹² concerning this book by Bauer (it was actually written by Bauer and Marx) explains to us that it was an essay intended to reduce the influence of the Hegelian Right of the time, in the guise of a pamphlet that seemed to come from an even more extreme Right. A double-sided way of doing things that Debord, with his Italian friend Gianfranco Sanguinetti, would later adopt for a book signed by “Censor”: *Truthful Report on the Last Chances to Save Capitalism in Italy*.¹³

Of course, one of the things at stake while reading Debord’s synopses is trying to detect the possible origin of certain more or less complicated developments of Debordian prose.¹⁴ For

⁶ Pierre Clastres (1934-1977) was a French anthropologist. His best-known work, *La Société contre l’État* [Society Against the State], was published in 1974.

⁷ Note by Leroy: Marx, Hegel, pp. 88, 95 and 98.

⁸ Cf. “Détournements, Allusions and Quotations in Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*”: <http://www.notbored.org/SOTS-detournements.html>

⁹ Note by Leroy: Marx, Hegel, p. 130.

¹⁰ Note by Leroy: Marx, Hegel, p. 246.

¹¹ Note by Leroy: Marx, Hegel, p. 118. Bauer’s pamphlet was originally published in German under the title *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichtes über Hegel den Atheisten und Antichristen. Ein Ultimatum* [“The Trumpets of the Last Judgment Against Hegel, Atheist and Antichrist: An Ultimatum”].

¹² Apparently not a note written by Debord, and so the reader fails to see the point of this little digression – unless it is merely to deny that Debord had any originality whatsoever.

¹³ Originally published in Italian in 1975 and translated into French by Debord in 1976. Published in English as *Truthful Report on the Last Chances to Save Capitalism in Italy* (Colossal Books, 2014).

¹⁴ Debordian prose?! Not Debordian or situationist theory? This choice of words lets the cat out of the bag: this article is about cutting Debord down to size, not seeing how and why he became so big.

example: Chapter V, “Time and History,” in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Here I’ll let Bertrand Cochard do the talking:

Debord engages in a history of domination that no longer takes the [usual] point of view of work, but that of time. The spectacle is the ‘false consciousness of time,’ and the critique that confronts it situates the reification of time at the center of the analysis of various historical modes of social control. And so, the reader’s card dedicated to *Reason in History*¹⁵ suggests that Debord might have had this work in mind when he drafted this chapter. Like Hegel, he starts with nomadic societies and ends up with an analysis of the society of his own time, by way of ancient democracy, oriental despotism and feudalism. Contrary to Hegel, on the other hand, his ambition is obviously not to present these societies as successive instances of the realization of the Spirit in the world under the form of liberty. It is a completely different history that he is writing, one in which it isn’t the Spirit but the spectacle that materializes in the world, following an idea that isn’t that of liberty, but of separation (from which comes the title of the first chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle*: ‘Separation Perfected’).¹⁶

With respect to an article published in *Temps modernes* in 1989, signed by Marc Lebiez, and comparing *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*, which had just been published, to *The Society of the Spectacle*, the author notes that, for Debord, the integrated spectacle had become the only reality; it was, in a certain way, the form taken by the rational State. This outcome thus verified Hegel’s theory.¹⁷ Which is contrary to the opening left open in the first essay (from 1967), in which, “in the perspective opened by Marx, Stirner and Bakunin,” the incompleteness leaves a revolution possible. And yet, on his reader’s card,¹⁸ Debord noted: “I

¹⁵ Hegel (1837).

¹⁶ Note by Leroy: Marx, Hegel, p. 441.

¹⁷ Debord responded to this article in the pages of *Cette mauvaise réputation* (1993): “In November 1989, *Les Temps modernes* – under the signature of Marc Lebiez – went philosophical, as if they had been capable of doing so in the past. *The Society of the Spectacle* is approved of, after a twenty-year-long delay. ‘Re-read today, out of the context of the Situationist International, *The Society of the Spectacle* appears to be a great theoretical work, extremely intelligent and stimulating . . .’ Hegel always pleases less when the revolution appears to have returned, and the ‘context of the Situationist International’ was May 1968. ‘One is astonished that this philosophical text . . . elicited reactions as violent as that of F. Chatelet, who spoke of “purely and simply *excluding*” “similar utterances (that) discourage all critique in advance.”’ What a shame! Thus, I quickly and unfortunately lost the quite recently acquired esteem of those excellent Hegelian heads, who today think I’ve abandoned the dialectic and revolution by having the inconvenient idea of describing the integrated-spectacular stage and the parallel government of Andreotti. ‘If the totality of the world is inverted, then this inversion becomes the only reality and cannot be presented as a counterfeit.’ One sees the force of this sophism.”

<http://www.notbored.org/this-bad-reputation.html>

¹⁸ The author fails to indicate which book Debord was reading and responding to when he wrote this particular note.

remain an extreme-Left Hegelian, along with Feuerbach, Marx, Stirner, Bakunin, Cieszkowski.”¹⁹

We can see that these reader’s notes, presented too succinctly here, are fascinating and form a kind of anthology of the thoughts of those two extremely powerful and fertile thinkers.²⁰ A choice made and (sparsely) commented upon by a person who was both a clandestine actor²¹ and an exceptional thinker of an era that was shut away in its own surface. I can only provide several extracts; any other commentary would be superfluous at best. For example, concerning the bureaucracy and art, the last two for today.

“The bureaucracy is a circle from which no one can escape. Its hierarchy is a hierarchy of knowledge. The head entrusts the inferior parts with understanding the details, and the inferior parts believe that the head is capable of understanding the general situation, and so they are both deceived.” Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*.²²

“Art proceeds from the feeling that life here on earth is real life, that the *finite* is the *infinite*; it comes from the enthusiasm that sees the *divine and supreme being* in a determinate and real being. *In itself, Christian monotheism possesses no principle of artistic or scientific culture. Only polytheism, which people have called the worship of idols, is the source of art and science. [...] Christians have only attained poetry after having concretely denied Christian theology, by adoring the divine being in the feminine being. Artists and poets, the Christians were in contradiction with the essence of their religion, according to the representations of the awareness that they had of it. Due to the spirit of religion, Petrarch repented of the poems in which he had made his Laure divine.*”²³

¹⁹ Note by Leroy: Marx, *Hegel*, p. 374.

²⁰ Marx and Hegel.

²¹ Clandestine actors do not publish books under their real names, nor do they belong to organizations that regularly publish journals that include their mailing addresses.

²² Note by Leroy: Marx, *Hegel*, p. 55. [*Translator*: this is a quote from Marx’s text and not from one of Debord’s synopses of that text.]

²³ Note by Leroy: Ludwig Feuerbach, *Provisional Thesis on the Reform of Philosophy*, quoted on p. 131. [*Translator*: once again, this is a quote from the original source, not from one of Debord’s synopses.]