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A Situation for Revolt: A Study of the Situationist
International's Influence on French Students During the
Revolt of 1968

Submitted Honors Thesis for History
University at Albany

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I. Introduction

In May 1968 France would bear witness to one of the largest social upheavals since the Paris Commune of 1848. In a matter of a few days the uprising would collapse the French economy and push the government of France to its breaking point. The driving forces behind this insurgency rested in the discontentment of the French university students of the time. Their activities and concerns would set the stage for this phenomenon.

As in other westernized countries, the youth of France had become increasingly politicized. This was compounded by the French tradition of open political discourse, the Algerian conflict of the 1950's, and by the protests of dissenters, which brought the students into a direct connection with the policies of the French government.

Often the students, who were rebelling against the conventions of either their university or their country, followed political writings that were leftist in nature. While these ideologies, at their base, stemmed from Karl Marx's manifesto on communism, events in world history had also created a wide variety of leftist thought that expanded upon Marxism. Some of these ideas included Trotskyism, Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism. Each of these schools of thought had a following of university students leading up to the revolt of May. There was also a relatively new school of thought that had begun to grow in the intellectual circles of Europe. This was the theory developed by the Situationist International.

Situationist International was formed in the Italian village of Cosio d'Arroscia in 1957. There, members from the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, the London Psychogeographical Society and the Letterist International came together and

agreed to form a new movement that would combine their ideas and help drive society towards revolution.

The Situationist International distinguished itself with its unique blend of political and artistic theory. Its political ideas drew heavily from Marxism. They championed or expounded upon Marx's idea of capitalism's alienating power. The Situationists argued that western society had progressed into a stage of advanced capitalism. In this stage, life was no longer about the accumulation of commodities but the accumulation of the illusion of commodities. Central to their theory was the idea of the Spectacle. In his book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord attempted to explain the notion of the Spectacle when he wrote:

Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production...it is the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself.”¹

The Spectacle was a dominating force. It could not be escaped from within the bounds of capitalism. This was because all of the institutions that existed within capitalism propagated for its continuation in order to ensure their continued existence.

In addition to the theories of Marx, the Situationists also drew from the philosophy of the French Libertines of the Enlightenment. Situationists like Raoul Vaneigem praised the Libertines for their willingness to cast off the mores and laws of their societies. Particularly, it was the unabashed sexual exploration by the Libertines that served as inspiration for the Situationists. They saw these actions as truly revolutionary

¹ Guy Debord, *Spectacle of the Society*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p.13.

because they placed the control of life back into the hands of the individual rather than the Spectacle.

As mentioned, the Situationists also incorporated artistic theory into their philosophical writings. Specifically, the Situationists subscribed to the ideas of the Dadaists and the Surrealists. However, it is important to note that the Situationists did not view these theories as being restricted to the realm of the art world. They would in fact criticize the separation of art from politics and everyday life. The Situationists adopted Dadaist ideas that art should be an integral part of life. Placing art into a realm on its own subtracted from its essence and power as a work of art. This idea of separation was easily combined with that of commodity production. When art was separated into its own category it became valued as a production of an artist. As such, art became a purchasable commodity, and its value came from its monetary worth rather than its artistic merit.

The Situationists also looked to the theories of Surrealism for a method of subverting what they saw as the overbearing power of the Spectacle. Surrealism offered an alternative way of viewing and experiencing the immediate world. Surrealism encouraged people to actively engage their surroundings rather than passively submitting to them. In art Surrealist accomplished this by combining images that had previously been unassociated with one another or by distorting images that the viewer saw as commonplace. This technique allowed the viewer to question images, forcing them to create a new interpretation of the images. The Situationists would use this technique in their own writing and propaganda to sway the public against the Spectacle.

The intent of this paper is to examine and show how the Situationist International influenced the students who revolted in Paris during May 1968. Specifically I will

compare the Situationists' views to those of the students in four different aspects. The first is their opinions towards education. The second is the role that sexuality has in Western society. The third facet will be the tactics of rebels engaged in revolution focusing on the use of spontaneity. Finally I will examine the impact of Situationists' theory of art on the rebels of May 1968.

II. Discontentment with the University System

The French students who revolted in May 1968 did so for a variety of reasons. As in most tumultuous times, the uprisings were fueled by perceived injustices. For the students, who were the most affected by the conditions within France's educational system, such injustices were raw. It is no surprise then that one of the main grievances voiced by rebelling students was directed against the educational system of France.

To understand why these students rebelled and why such a violent course of events unfolded in the spring of 1968, it is necessary to look into the economic and political conditions that developed in France over the course of several years prior to this time of discontentment.

In the years leading up to the revolts, France's economy, like the economies of most industrialized countries, was experiencing a great expansion. It was an expansion that allowed many families to accumulate an amount of wealth that previously would have been unattainable. Favoring the middle class, this expansion enabled many more people to save and to have the funds to send their children to university. This resulted in a fourfold increase in middle and lower-middle class enrollment compared to the continued

stable enrollment numbers of the upper class. While the enrollment of students from working class families still remained relatively low, universities nevertheless saw a surge in their student population.² In 1962-1963, the number of students enrolled in higher education was 280,000. By 1967-1968, the enrollment had jumped to 605,000 students.³ This increase would play a key role in shifting the overall political and social sensibilities on campuses.

Along with the increase in student population, there was a dramatic increase in the number of professors hired during this time. Most of the newly hired faculty members were *maîtres assistants* and *assistants* (lower-ranking instructors). The presence of these *maîtres assistants* in the teaching staff rose from 44 percent in 1956-1957 to 72 percent in 1967-68.⁴ In comparison, these instructors were generally closer than were the established, long standing professors to the students both in age and political temperament. By helping to bring the concerns of the students to a wider audience, these young teachers would prove influential to the development of the students' revolt.

During this time, as the overall enrollment increased, so, too, did the female student population. In 1950 thirty three percent of the student population was women. By the 1965-1966 school year, women accounted for fifty percent.⁵ This rapid growth of a female presence on campus forced France's educational system to confront a new situation: how to deal with interactions between the sexes in campus dormitories.

² Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), p.20.

³ Ibid., p.18.

⁴ Ibid., p.19.

⁵ Ibid.

The Antony Campus proved to be the first battleground for students against the established university gender policy. In 1967, male students staged sit-ins in the girls' dormitories in order to fight against existing regulations. After three months of battles between students and administrators, the latter finally agreed to change the rules.⁶ However, the concessions made at Antony did not reflect a change in the overall university system. Even though it was found at Antony that ninety percent of the parents of minors were willing to allow their children to visit with the opposite sex, students on other campuses would have to fight similar policies during that year. Although relations between the sexes was not the main focus of student demands, it was seen by students as a simple request, and therefore the unwillingness of campus officials to listen to the students was viewed by them as an attempt by administrators to preserve the elite morals of the old order.⁷

With the boom in enrollment, other problems surfaced within French universities. Among them were overcrowding and fiscal issues. In 1963, students complained about the lack of action being taken by authorities in these regards. A leaflet that was distributed by the *Union Nationale des Étudiants de France* (The National Union of French Students, UNEF) illustrates the concerns of some students. The leaflet points out the lack of “new reading rooms, no new seats in the libraries...” and also complains of the rising cost of photocopies and books. UNEF goes on to title Christian Fouchet, the head of the Ministry of Education, as an “illusionist” for his false promises of

⁶ John Gretton, *Students and Workers: An Analytical Account of Dissent* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1969), p.74.

⁷ Vladimir Fišera (ed.), *Writing on the Wall May 1968: A Documentary Anthology* (London: Allison & Busby, 1978), p.16.

improvement. In this leaflet the students also criticize the plans for the reforming of the university system's selection process for incoming students.⁸

France's higher education system was traditionally divided according to fields of study. The main categories for study were that of the *série scientifique* (natural sciences), *série économique et sociale* (social sciences) and *série littéraire* (humanities). Placement in a university was determined by the *baccalauréat*, an exam taken at the end of a student's schooling in a *lycée*. In the 1960's, requirements for the *scientifique baccalauréat* were toughened, while the *baccalauréat* for the humanities remained relatively easy.⁹ Traditionally, students who enrolled in academic programs for law and medicine accounted for the majority of the student population, but the 1960's saw a decline in this tradition and an increase in the number of students enrolled in philosophical fields of study, resulting in a shift, with the majority of students now enrolled in the humanities and social sciences. The increase in the overall student population, combined with an increase in the number of students entering into the social sciences and humanities, resulted in severe overcrowding of these disciplines in many of France's universities. It would be these social science students, especially those studying sociology, who would begin to question the practices of their universities and the French educational system. They would be the prominent force behind the emergence of student rebels.

The sixth issue of the Situationist International, printed in August 1961, included an article, written by Guy Debord, entitled *Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in*

⁸ UNEF, "UNEF Leaflet, circulated on 6 November 1963," in *Writing on the Wall May 1968*, p.50.

⁹ Seidman, p.19.

Everyday Life. A tape recording of the article had been presented in May of that year at a conference convened by the Group for Research on Everyday Life. Henri Lefebvre, who was a professor of Sociology at Nanterre, held the conference at the Center of Sociological Studies of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. The fact that Lefebvre was aware of the leaders and the ideas of Situationist International shows the pervasiveness of this group's perspectives.

The article itself was a critique of the field of Sociology. Guy Debord begins the critique by stating that "Sociologists, for example, are only too inclined to remove from everyday life things that happen to the every day and to transfer them to separate and supposedly superior spheres."¹⁰ In an attempt to show the sociologists how separated their theories were from real everyday life, the speech was presented at the conference through a recording rather than in person. This tactic was a way to break with accustomed routine and to bring into question the claims the sociologists were attempting to make and what it was that the participants of the conference were taking part in. Debord mocked the sociologists who attempted to understand everyday life by the specialization of the day's activities, in effect destroying the true nature of everyday life. "Everyday life, policed and mystified by every means, is a sort of reservation for good natives who keep modern society running without understanding it..."¹¹ In saying this, Debord claims that sociologists, in attempting and failing to understand everyday life, unwittingly aid in the continuation of society that abuses and distorts the meaning of everyday life. The inability to comprehend the essence of everyday life leaves sociologists unable to

¹⁰ Guy Debord, "Perspectives for Conscious Alternation in Everyday Life" in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. & trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1989), p.68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.70.

criticize society's treatment of it. "To fail to criticize everyday life today means accepting the prolongation of the present thoroughly rotten forms of culture and politics..."¹² Debord believed that sociologists failed to see that everyday life had been twisted and subjected to the modern capitalist society, that everyday life had become enslaved to what he called the spectacle. Sociologists' failure to recognize the presence of the Spectacle within the framework of society and daily existence only ensured its continuation.

In the spring of 1965, in an edition of *Études Sociologiques*, which was the bulletin of the sociology students' group at the University of Paris, B. Flamand wrote an article addressed to his fellow students. In the piece Flamand points to many of the students' indifferences towards politics, which he sees as an increasing problem. According to Flamand, students are unwilling to question and more willing to accept the decisions that are made by officials, people who are all too happy to have students blindly follow them¹³. Flamand concludes that the students are indifferent because they are prevented from thinking of themselves as students and, as a result of this, from thinking about the problems that affect the student population. He discusses what would increasingly become familiar complaints: small and overcrowded classrooms, lack of lecturers and assistants, lack of books, and the high expense of school supplies. He warns that the indifference will also allow the authorities "on the pretext of 'democratizing' the teaching..." to increase social discrimination which has always existed.

Two aspects of Flamand's writing are worth noting. The first is that the essay was published in a bulletin constructed by and for sociology students. This offers an example

¹² Ibid., p.70.

¹³B.Flamand, "Indifference," in *Writing on the Wall May 1968*, p.58.

of how the students of sociology, being instructed to look closely at the mechanisms of society, were truly beginning to put their education into practice by critically examining the university system. Secondly, this article, along with the recording sent by Debord to the sociology conference at the Center of Sociological Studies of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, indicates that the field of sociology was ripe for the emergence of radical ideas. Finally, Flamand's essay shows that students were going beyond many of their professors in their critique of society, not only asking how it worked but also why it was structured the way was.

In 1966, a few radical students were elected to the Bureau of the local students Association (AFGES), which was a local chapter of UNEF at the University of Strasbourg. Using funds from the school that were made available to UNEF, these radical students printed 10,000 copies of a pamphlet titled *De la misère en milieu étudiant: considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier* (On the Poverty of Student Life: A Consideration of Its Economic, Political, Sexual, Psychological and Notably Intellectual Aspects and a Modest Proposal for its Remedy). They proceeded to distribute the pamphlet at the official ceremony for the beginning of the academic year.¹⁴ Controversy surrounded this event, and it turned into a scandal. By court order the student union was closed, and students were sentenced to disciplinary action.¹⁵ Judge Llabador, who presided over the case, said of the ideas put forth in the work: "Their wide diffusion in

¹⁴Members of the Internationale Situationniste and Students of Strasbourg, "On the poverty of Student Life : A Consideration of Its Economic, Political, Sexual, Psychological and Notably Intellectual Aspects and A Modest Proposal for its Remedy" in *Beneath the Paving Stones: Situationists and the Beach, May 1968*, Dark Star (eds.) (San Francisco: AK Press/Darkstar, 2001), p. 9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

both student circles and among the general public, by the local, national and foreign press, are a threat to the morality, the studies, the reputation and thus the very future of the students of the University of Strasbourg.”¹⁶ This statement can be seen as having prophetic value since it was this pamphlet that would inspire not only students at Strasbourg to rebel, but also students of Nanterre, Sorbonne and other campuses throughout France to question and rebel against the practices of their schools and society.

The controversy surrounding the text stemmed as much from its content as from its authors. Some accused the Situationists of infiltrating Strasbourg’s chapter of UNEF and using university funds for their own agenda to “destroy the existing social organizations and structure of the university”.¹⁷ However, in October 1967, the Situationists refuted the accusations against them in the eleventh issue of their journal. In this publication they printed an article titled *Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal*. The article explained that they, the Situationists, had not infiltrated the UNEF, but rather had been approached by students from Strasbourg whose friends had recently been elected to AFGES. The pamphlet, *On the Poverty of Student Life*, credited to Mustapha Khayati, a Situationist, was the result of students’ wishes for a critique of the University. These students came to the Situationists because they believed the Situationists could produce a piece of writing that would depict the students’ concerns. This is the only part the Situationists would take credit for. After *On the Poverty of Student Life* had been written, it was left to the students to copy and disseminate it. The Situationists go on to note that the students who passed out the text had publicly denied being members of the Situationist International in a communiqué on November 29:

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Grettton, p.75.

“None of the members of our Bureau belongs to the Situationist International, a movement which for some time has published a journal of the same name, but we declare ourselves in complete solidarity with its analyses and perspectives.”¹⁸ Now it should be noted that in 1961 the Situationist International had stated that it was not willing to accept disciples and was only interested in “...setting autonomous people loose in the world”.¹⁹ To this end, the Situationists went on to write in their journal that statements made by individual students claiming to be speaking on behalf of the Situationist International, were made out of resentment because these students were not allowed to be inducted to the group.²⁰ These students were called out by their peers as being “false situationists” and were seen as trying to capitalize on the scandal. After receiving this type of pressure from peers, these rejected students eventually renounced ever being part of the Situationists.

Although the way in which the pamphlet, *On the Poverty of Student Life*, came into existence was seen as scandalous, it was actually the harsh criticism of the state of the French university system that created the true controversy.

The pamphlet began with the supposition that studies, surveys, and the popular notion of the student population lacked what was truly needed, “a view of Modern society as a whole”.²¹ Just like any other person within a modern capitalist society, the student is slated into a certain 'role' within the constructs of university life. The role of the

¹⁸ The Situationist International, “Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal,” in *Beneath the Paving Stones*, p.31.

¹⁹ The Situationist International, “Questionnaire” in *Situationist International Anthology* p.140.

²⁰ The Situationist International, “Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal” in *Beneath the Paving Stones*, p.32.

²¹ “On the poverty of Student Life” in *Beneath the Paving Stones*, p.10.

student was described in the pamphlet as being “schizophrenic”. This was because the student was seen as having a double life, one stuck in the present and the other in the future.²² This was compounded by the fact that students were financially in a kind of economic limbo. *On the Poverty of Student Life* claimed that although “80% of students come from income groups well above the working class,” as students, “90% have less money than the meanest labourer.” Their current poverty is supposed to be rewarded when they assume their future 'role' in society. However, in reality they will not be rewarded since the future 'role' for many of the students from middle and lower middle class families is that of a *petits cadre* (a low level manager).

On the Poverty of Student Life went on to say that in an attempt to suppress the inevitable realities of their dreary futures, the students submit to the oppressive policies of the University's higher powers. Focusing on the present, each student invents “an imaginary prestige for himself.”²³ They follow the rules of the university under the delusion that they are part of an accomplished educational system and that they are equal to the generations of great minds that have passed through before them. This belief, however, is a fallacy. "Once upon a time the Universities were respected, the student persists in the belief that he is lucky to be there. But he arrived too late."²⁴

According to the Situationists, the days of a university that educated the likes of Hegel and Diderot were gone. The only purpose that universities fulfilled was the production of specialists, the "mass production of students who are not educated and have

²² Ibid., p.10.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p.11.

been rendered incapable of thinking."²⁵ It was the teacher who further propagated this system by repressing critical thinking and feeding students' ignorance. The Situationists further expressed the belief that "the future revolutionary society will condemn the lecture theatre and faculty as mere noise."²⁶

To the Situationists, the idea of the University as an independent power was never really more than a dream. Even in the time of free-trade capitalism, when the university system was small, it was a product of the society. With the modern stages of capitalism, the university grew in importance, yet it continued to remain a reflection of society. Professors refused to recognize their role in the system as the "sheepdog to the world's white-collars"²⁷ They attempted to keep the form of the old system, through instructor dominance, while refusing to challenge the current role of the university.

The Situationists contended that the struggle by some to simply reform the university was not enough and required a larger struggle against the faults found within capitalist society. These societal issues, that took place outside of the student realm, were beyond the students' control, but were nonetheless issues that influenced them. For the student, the voicing of discontentment came through a rebellion against the university policies that shaped the student's studies, for that was what defined his condition. However, this was not all the student needed to rebel against. Since the student was a product of society, his alienation could only be defeated by the destruction of the society that alienated.

²⁵ Ibid., p.11.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

In the months leading up to the fall semester of 1967, the demands of students throughout France showed the first traces of the Situationists' perspective. One example can be seen in a motion that was put forward to the UNEF congress in July 1967. It proposed that the only way the UNEF could truly help the students was through the destruction of the regressive policies imposed by the authorities, by the dismantling of class functions and practices of the university. Seeing the process as one based in the economic and social policy of French capitalist society, the proposal called into question the way in which the educational system organized students for higher education and professional training. The motion also examined the content of education. The students complained that universities were simply professing a general education that had no purpose other than to promote the status quo; "they are all part of that vision of social reality which belongs to the ruling classes..."²⁸ Furthermore, the motion noted that learning was centered on "specialist training" to make education profitable in accordance with the desires of capitalist society. It finished by stating that the goal of the UNEF should not be the opening of this kind of University to everyone but "should be to challenge the very nature of the university and the mechanisms by which it serves the interests of the ruling class."²⁹

Just as prior students had expressed the beliefs of the Situationists in *On the Poverty of Student Life*, the students of the UNEF pointed to the idea that specialization was becoming the main focus of education in their schools. Moreover, they connected this specialization with the needs of capitalist economy just as the Situationists had.

²⁸ UNEF, "Motion presented to the UNEF congress (Lyons, July 1967)" in *Writing on the Wall May 1968*, p.67.

²⁹ Ibid.

Finally, the students did not seem only to want to reform the university so that it was open to all, but instead they called into question the role that the university played in the context of society as a whole. As the Situationists insisted, “A total critique of the world is the guarantee of the realism and reality of a revolutionary organization.”³⁰ Although the students did not announce specific intent for a full revolution of society, they certainly had their lenses focused on a field that encompassed much more than just their schools.

Two years after the creation of *On the Poverty of Student Life*, during the revolt of 1968, Jacques Sauvageot, head of the UNEF, seemed to paraphrase the pamphlet’s reasoning in order to explain why the revolt had occurred. In an interview, conducted by Hervé Bourges, Sauvageot stated that the University mirrored the constraints of the society and played a larger part in the society and its economy, resulting in both the subordination of, and insubordination by, the students at the universities.

Students are expected to have a certain critical intelligence, while their studies are such that they are not allowed to exercise it. On the other hand, they realize that in a few years’ time they will not be able to find a part to play in society that corresponds to their training. This dual phenomenon is, I believe, the basic cause of their revolution”³¹

III. Making Desires Reality

The University of Nanterre was built to accommodate the ever-increasing student population. Unfortunately for the academic system, the creation of new universities, such as Nanterre, did little to quell the problem of overcrowding. From 1964 to 1967, the

³⁰ “On the Poverty of Student Life” in *Beneath the Paving Stones*, p.22.

³¹ Hervé Bourges (ed.), *The Student Revolt: The Activists Speak*, trans. B. R. Brewster (London: Cox & Wyman, 1968), p. 23.

enrollment at Nanterre more than doubled. During the academic year of 1967-1968, 5,000 first-year students enrolled at a campus that was only situated for 2,500.³² The University's location was not chosen because it was a prime candidate for a symbol of French higher education, but because the land, which had been used for an aviation supply depot for the Ministry of Defense, was available for use. The neighborhood surrounding the area of the university was an economically depressed community. Shanty-towns, factories, industrial warehouses, and public housing were the backdrop to a university which did not garner any praise for its architectural style. The state of the campus was so dull that even professors criticized the campus. Henri Lefebvre, a professor, said of Nanterre, "This is a desolate and strange landscape," and that "[in this suburb] unhappiness becomes concrete."³³ In addition, to juxtapose the campus and its immediate surroundings, there was the adjacent Neuilly, an upper-middle-class neighborhood. While the Nanterre campus seemed like the administration's perfect solution to their overcrowding problems, it was also the perfect place for the sizable population of sociology students to practice their critique of society.

As with other campuses such as Antony, the students of Nanterre began their critique by criticizing their campus' sexuality policies. In March 1967, and once again a year later, the students circulated a leaflet that featured Wilhelm Reich's manifesto of 1936, *What is Sexual Chaos?*³⁴ The manifesto placed what was considered social norms into the category of sexual chaos. These norms included forming a lifelong relationship without knowing a partner sexually, the acceptance of living a life sleeping with

³² Ibid., p.22.

³³ Seidman, p. 22.

³⁴ Fišera, p.311.

prostitutes, abstaining from sex until marriage, the pawing at nude pictures when young and then when older becoming a nationalist in defense of woman's purity. The leaflet then described what is not sexual chaos by basically negating all of the aforementioned social norms. The use of Reich's work in this student leaflet shows a deep connection with the work of the Situationists since Wilhelm Reich is also mentioned directly in the Situationist-influenced student pamphlet of 1966, *On the Poverty of Student Life*. "He is so 'unconventional' that thirty years after Wilhelm Reich, that excellent educator of youth, he continues to follow the most traditional forms of amorous-erotic behavior, reproducing the general relations of class society in his intersexual relations"³⁵

The criticism espoused by the Situationists was very closely in line with criticisms developed by Reich. Raoul Vaneigem, a Situationist, further explored the ideas of sexuality in relation to revolutionary spirit in his book, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Like Khayati, Vaneigem agreed with much of Reich's interpretation of sexuality in society. However, Vaneigem believed that Reich had failed to see that social crisis in any given time is intensely linked to a crisis of an "orgastic kind"³⁶.

Vaneigem believed that social crisis was linked to total freedom of sexuality; "Love offers the purest glimpse of true communication that any of us have had."³⁷ He believed that communication is important because it is viewed as the cornerstone of pure democracy. Any attempt to regulate love, then, is an attempt to disrupt democracy and gain power, and, according to Vaneigem, this is what the bourgeoisie have done: "this class has finally succeeded in separating lovers at the most basic level, within the

³⁵ "On the Poverty of Student Life," in *Situationist International Anthology*, p.323.

³⁶ Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Rebel Press, 2001) p.253.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.248.

physical act of love itself.”³⁸ In his book, Vaneigem praises Donatien Alphonse François Marquis de Sade for his willingness to fulfill his sexual desires. Vaneigem equates de Sade’s two possible attitudes towards sex with the current and revolutionary structure of the society. The first is one in which pleasure is derived from the torture and objectification of a lover, which Vaneigem compares to the old society of hated masters. The second is one where lovers do all they can to please each other and in doing so increase their own pleasure, a world of masters without slaves.³⁹ When these views are applied to France the former can be seen as the Situationists’ view of capitalist France while the latter was a Revolutionary France.

The tension between the administration and students’ views of adolescent sexuality would prove to be a springboard for the emergence of many revolutionaries in the early part of ’68. On January 8, 1968, Daniel Cohn-Bendit first gained notoriety in the press for his rebellious remarks to Francois Missoffe, the minister of youth and sports, in regard to a paper issued by the minister. Missoffe had written that the youth of France were truly concerned with having a successful career so that they could buy a car or pay a dowry. When the minister was visiting Nanterre to inaugurate a pool, Cohn-Bendit criticized him for ignoring the youth’s sexual desires. In reply, the minister reportedly told Cohn-Bendit that he had sexual problems and to jump in the pool to cool off. Not to be outdone Cohn-Bendit is said to have retorted by accusing Missoffe of acting like a Nazi.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., p.249.

³⁹ Ibid., p.251.

⁴⁰ Seidman, p.60.

The battle between students and administrators over the sexual rights of the students would continue in the month of February. On February 14, 1968, six hundred students assembled to discuss occupying the girls' dormitory at Nanterre.⁴¹ That same night four hundred fifty people occupied the dormitory and imposed a policy of open visitation. This action was repeated at university campuses across France, prompting members of the UNEF to declare 13-14 February "days of action to abolish the interior regulations."⁴²

After these events, many of the Nanterre students would remain active in the movement to change social policies. Cohn-Bendit, Jean-Pierre Duteuil, Bertrand Gerard and Bernard Granautier produced a critique entitled *Why Sociologists?* The writing challenged the role sociologists played in French society and called on students to stop supporting the system which upheld it, "*all boycotting of courses to help us in this is welcome.*"⁴³ The students went on to criticize the role that the field of sociology played as a puppet of capitalist society, allowing exploitation through rationalization. They wrote that in an attempt to analyze specific aspects of society, sociologists failed to question the larger structural problems. As examples they noted the study that addressed the soldier's morale without questioning the role of armies, and the critique of consumer conditioning without any attempt to criticize the "social function" technique.⁴⁴ The students' critique was in alignment with the argument made by Guy Debord in his 1961 speech to the

⁴¹ Ibid., p.67.

⁴² Ibid., p.68.

⁴³ Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Jean-Pierre Duteuil, Bertrand Gerard, Bernard Granautier, "Why Sociologists?" in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, ed. Alain Schnapp and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p.115.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 116.

Conference of Everyday Life. Debord thought that sociologists were specializing in the events of everyday life and failing to grasp or question what the larger event was and its overall influence on the events of everyday life. Also paralleling Debord, the four students saw sociologists as police or watchdogs for the status quo of society. Debord had said that sociologists kept “modern society running without understanding it.”⁴⁵ The students expressed a similar thought when they wrote, “The majority of professors and students are committed to the maintenance of order...”⁴⁶

The critique made by those four students foreshadowed a surge in radicalism among students of sociology. Starting in March of that same year, sociology and psychology students began to protest their subjects’ roles within the university and in the society at large. Radical students urged peers to boycott exams. Some interrupted introductory lectures by taking the floor from professors and informing the underclassmen of what the radicals saw as hypocrisy.⁴⁷ Their actions came to a head at Nanterre.

At around 5:00 pm on March 22nd, several hundred students invaded and occupied the administration building. Near the onset of the occupation a split occurred between the overtly radical and the simply rebellious students. The radical group of students known as the Enragés wanted to expel occupiers whom they viewed as Stalinists. However, a majority of the students would not comply with the demands of the Enragés. Angered at what they saw as revolutionary weakness, the Enragés left, but only after painting the

⁴⁵ Guy Debord, “Perspectives for Conscious Alternation in Everyday Life,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, p.70.

⁴⁶ Cohn-Bendit, Duteuil, Gerard and Granautier, “Why Sociologists?” in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p.119.

⁴⁷ Seidman, p.71.

walls with various slogans.⁴⁸ The 150 students that remained addressed their grievances and the reasoning behind their occupation in a resolution that was adopted that night. Among their grievances they cited the presence of plainclothes police on campus, blacklists, imprisoned students, and the constant arrests being made of suspected radicals. These students also addressed concerns that focused on the greater society when they spoke of the “automation and cybernisation of our society” and the “introduction of psycho-sociological techniques into industry to smooth away the class conflicts...”⁴⁹ These ideas repeated the rhetoric previously stated by other radical students and once more drew upon the ideas of the Situationist International.

The theory that French society was becoming automated and that life seemed to be losing the intimacy it once held was closely linked to the ideas of Raoul Vaneigem. The belief that the rhetoric in the field of sociology was allowing capitalism to reign and that those in the field of psychology blamed a human’s mental anguish, not on a broken society, but on the individual’s own limitations, echoed the ideas of Guy Debord and Mustapha Khayati.

This written proclamation of student concerns illustrated their desire to bring about change and also acted as a messenger of their intentions as they noted, “It is no longer the time for peaceful marches...”⁵⁰ it was a time for radical actions to be used in protest. Indeed the actions taken by student radicals did become more daring. “Student

⁴⁸ René Viénet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68* (New York: Autonomedia, 1992), p.22.

⁴⁹ March 22nd Movement, “Resolution adopted 22 March 1968,” in *Writing on the Wall May 1968*, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

radicals stole books, cut telephone lines, and vandalized university property”⁵¹ in what can be seen as an attempt to bring direct action and protest to the university’s doorstep.

During this time of campus unrest, the administration at Nanterre had hoped that the Easter vacation from April 4th to the 18th would diffuse the revolutionary tension, but it did not. Events abroad -- the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the resulting riots, as well as the assassination of the leader of the German SDS -- kept revolution in the minds of the students.⁵² Upon returning to Nanterre, the students of the March 22nd Movement had a new bulletin to distribute. As a way to refresh the minds of all students, the bulletin recapped the rebellious events of the past two semesters. It reiterated one of the main complaints of the radicals that “higher education [was being used] as initiation”⁵³ to prepare them for managerial roles in bourgeois society. The bulletin went on to explain that the actions that had been taken by students were done in order to bring the university’s covert authoritarianism out into the open. The writers proudly pointed out that the actions that were taken would continue to occur and that they wished to put practice before theory.

Direct action continued to be used by radical students at Nanterre after Easter Vacation. Students disrupted classes and ridiculed professors. Preparations for violent confrontation were also seen with the stockpiling of clubs, iron bars, and stones in the boys’ and girls’ dormitories.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Seidman, p.75.

⁵² Seidman, p.77.

⁵³ March 22nd Movement, “Bulletin No.5494bis” in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ Seidman, p.84.

The agitation at Nanterre finally culminated on May 2. On that day a group of students attempted to occupy the administration building to show a film on the Black Panthers. They were ejected, but, undaunted, they found an auditorium to take over. The radicals settled on an amphitheatre that was already being used by the historian René Rémond. It has been reported by some that the students simply heckled and insulted Rémond out of the class,⁵⁵ while others claim the events were more violent.⁵⁶ Either way, this action was the last the Nanterre administration could tolerate. Shortly after, Pierre Grappin, the dean of Nanterre, suspended all classes.

IV. Group Action and the Sorbonne

With the closing of Nanterre on May 2, the UNEF and the students of the Movement of March 22nd called for all students to gather and protest at the Sorbonne on the third of May. When radical left students gathered in the courtyard and in various rooms of the Sorbonne, a right-wing political group known as Occident formed to stage a counter protest. These right-wing students marched down the Boulevard Saint-Michel while chanting anti-left slogans, and it appeared that they were to be headed for a confrontation with the radicals at the Sorbonne. Fearing an attack, radicals at the Sorbonne armed themselves by breaking apart school property.⁵⁷ Shortly after, Jean Roche, the chancellor, asked the police to help remove the students, and 300 students were arrested. While moving the students off of the campus, violence broke out between

⁵⁵ Seidman, p.84.

⁵⁶ “Motion of the Assembly of Nanterre Assistants and Assistant Professors” in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ Seidman, p.94.

the students and police. Police vans were blocked and their tires slashed. Police dispensed tear gas; students threw cobblestones and displaced vehicles.⁵⁸

As a result of these events, the student population became more politicized. Leaflets were produced and distributed by members of the *Mouvement d'Action Universitaire* (MAU) who urged students to form action committees because they felt that such committees were necessary; “the structures of UNEF are not sufficient, not adapted. The movement of revolt against academic bureaucracy and Gaullist power is not concerned about political/trade-union cleavages.”⁵⁹

This call for democratic action committees would continue to be heard throughout the revolt. The idea of action committees had a strong presence in the writings of the Situationist International. In *On the Poverty of Student Life*, Khayati denounced trade unionism in favor of workers’ councils, in which the workers have direct control on what occurs within the group.⁶⁰ Although Khayati was writing of worker groups, students who wished to reject everything about bourgeois culture modeled their actions on what the proletariat would and should do in a revolutionary society. Students of all levels would heed the call for the creation of action committees.

The authors of the pamphlet expressed concern that although the gatherings which had taken place that week showed how large the movement had become, the gatherings also revealed how divided the students were from one another.⁶¹ In *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Vaneigem expressed a similar concern about revolutionary groups when

⁵⁸ Seidman, p.94.

⁵⁹ MAU, “Make Sure the Revolt is not a Flash in the Pan: How to Form an Action Committee,” in *Writing on the Wall May 1968*, p.88.

⁶⁰ “On the Poverty of Student Life” in *Beneath the Paving Stones*, p.22.

⁶¹ The Action Committees, “Call from the Action Committees” in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p.172.

he wrote: “An efficiently hierarchised army can win a war, but not a revolution: an undisciplined mob can win neither. The problem then is how to organize without creating a hierarchy.”⁶² The point of organizing was not so that any one person could take control and lead the movement to victory. Organization was to occur spontaneously when those with mutual interests agreed to work with one another in order to see their interests realized.

Students continued to organize and revolt throughout the first week of May. The fighting between the police and students grew increasingly violent. Structured marches planned by the UNEF and official communist parties often ended when students spontaneously broke out into their own violent protest. May 10 would be witness to a prime example of the power of the students’ spontaneity.

May 10 would become known as the night of the barricades and a major turning point of the revolution. That night there would be 400 reported injuries, half sustained by the police, 500 arrests, and 200 cars burned or vandalized.⁶³ The statistics of the night demonstrate the level of violence that occurred during altercations between protesters and the police. This was due in part to the construction of a system of barricades in the Latin Quarter that allowed the protesters to have a better defense, if not an advantage against police tactics.

The barricades had been constructed that day using a variety of materials that could be found in the surrounding construction sites.⁶⁴ There was no single style of barricade as some had wire and nails, others used any sharp objects strewn in front of

⁶² Vaneigem, p.260.

⁶³ Seidman, p.113.

⁶⁴ Viénet, p.36.

them, and some had gasoline spread on the ground immediately ahead of them.⁶⁵ From the barricades and the roofs of the adjacent buildings, students lobbed paving stones, other projectiles, and Molotov cocktails at the police. The police responded by firing tear gas and percussion grenades. Many protesters claimed that the police also used chloride and bromide grenades, which did severe physical harm to anyone who breathed in the fumes.⁶⁶ Barricades that appeared to be lost to the police were torched by students who also had a line of burning zigzagging cars awaiting the police on the other side of the barricades.⁶⁷ The battle of May 10 lasted until 5:30 am, but the effects of the fight were far reaching.

The night of the barricades overwhelmingly turned public opinion in support of the students and other radicals, with 61 percent feeling that student demands were justified and 71 percent favoring leniency for those who had been arrested.⁶⁸ The brutality of the police towards protesters on the night of May 10 and the commitment shown by the students who were fighting also convinced many workers that students were serious about their concerns and not just playing revolution.⁶⁹

On the 11th of May, the Confederation of Labor (CGT), the democratic French Confederation of Labor (CFDT), the National Education Federation (FEN) and UNEF called for a general strike on the 13th to illustrate their solidarity, to voice their desire to

⁶⁵ Seidman, p.114.

⁶⁶ The May 3 Action Committees, "War Gas!" in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p.183-185.

⁶⁷ Viénet, p.36.

⁶⁸ Seidman, p.116.

⁶⁹ Seidman, p.117.

end repression, and to show their support for democracy.⁷⁰ From the 13th on, workers and unions would play a larger role in the revolts that occurred from May into June. Unions would attempt to use the situation in their favor, demanding concessions mostly in the form of pay increases from the government. (One of the first to do so was the police union.)⁷¹ The days following the night of the barricades also saw an increase in the occupation of university campuses by students. The student council of Strasburg declared their independence in a declaration issued at 7 a.m. on May 11. They claimed their university as autonomous from the government and the previous academic administration, giving all power to a joint council of student and professors.⁷² Later that day, a small group of students occupied Censier, an annex of the Sorbonne. Two days later a larger group of about 500 students stormed and occupied the Sorbonne itself, and that night the students established a general assembly in which they voted and discussed actions to be taken by the group. On the first night of the occupation of the Sorbonne the students produced two communications for the wider public. The first was a declaration stating their autonomy as a people's university, "open day and night, at all times, to all workers."⁷³ They stood by their word and fed and lodged anyone, student or not, who was willing to help with the revolution.⁷⁴ In their second declaration they stated their intent to

⁷⁰ CGT, FEN, CFDT, UNEF, "The Truth About the Events of the Night of May 10-11," in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, pp.182-83.

⁷¹ Seidman, p.119.

⁷² Censier Center of the fac des Lettres, "General Call to the Population," in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p.190.

⁷³ General Assembly, "The Sorbonne Is Open to Workers At All Times," in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p.196.

⁷⁴ Seidman, p.126.

run the university through “committees constituted by workers, students and teachers.”⁷⁵ Once the occupation began, a variety of committees were established for activities such as cooking, the press, coordination and occupation.

V. Spontaneity of Revolution

Beginning with the construction of the barricades on the 10th and continuing on to the occupation and maintenance of the universities, the students and other protesters’ action showed the use and power of spontaneity. Spontaneity was one of the key components cited by Vaneigem for a successful revolution and society. He felt that society had banned all forms of play, or, as he saw it, true creativity, and restricted it for only children. He recognized that adults have competitions, TV, games, and gambling; however, he viewed them as false and ‘co-opted’ forms of play.⁷⁶ Spontaneity to Vaneigem was made in an immediate experience not regulated by norms or social conditioning. Creative spontaneity, and what Vaneigem viewed as true life, centered on the individual’s unrestrained perception of the here and now. “Spontaneity is the true mode of being of individual creativity, creativity’s initial, immaculate form, unpolluted at the source and as yet unthreatened by the mechanisms of co-optation.”⁷⁷ Although Vaneigem believed that creativity is distributed to all, he wrote that spontaneous expression can only occur on specific occasions. “These occasions are pre-revolutionary

⁷⁵ General Assembly, “The Sorbonne Is Open to Workers At All Times,” in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p.196.

⁷⁶ Vaneigem, p.257.

⁷⁷ Vaneigem, p.194.

moments, the source of the poetry that changes life and transforms the world.”⁷⁸ The actions taken in the chaos of pre-revolutionary moments created a situation in which the individuals were able to live in the moment. It was a type of play that allowed for their own improvisation to the occurrences around them, a creation of a poetic life movement.

Spontaneity, it seemed, was the strength of the rebellions in France. The spontaneous nature in which the barricades were erected on the night of May 10 gave the first example of spontaneity as a powerful force. With no leader, students, workers, and other protesters were able to fight off the police for hours. The unexpected occupations of university campuses by students also exemplified the force of spontaneity. Even the democratic nature of the occupation at the Sorbonne gave the movement a life of poetic uncertainty. The advantage given to the revolt in 1968 because of spontaneous actions did not go unnoticed. When asked if the student movement should be consolidated or continue to develop spontaneously, Jacques Sauvageot said that “It would be dangerous to centralize and coordinate too quickly and sharply, particularly if this were to restrict the spontaneity which has been the movement’s strength.”⁷⁹ As was shown earlier, Sauvageot’s ideas appear to be parallel to the ideas of the Situationist International. In this particular case they parallel the ideas of Raoul Vaneigem. Later in his interview Sauvageot would reaffirm this when he said “The positive aspect of this disorder is the emergence of consciousness followed by action. At present we are feeling a great wind blowing; it may be disorderly, but it is creative, and contagious.”⁸⁰ Here the influence of Situationist ideology becomes more apparent. Sauvageot spoke of the creative power that

⁷⁸ Vaneigem, p.196.

⁷⁹ Hervé Bourges, ed., *The Student Revolt: The Activists Speak*, trans. B. R. Brewster (London: Cox & Wyman, 1968), p.28.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

the disorder of spontaneity created within the revolutionary movement. He believed that this stemmed from the realization of a new consciousness, a different perception of the world, allowing for revolutionary action. Even those who were not students recognized the influence that spontaneity gave the revolt. Alain Geismar, the leader of the National Union of University Lecturers (SNESup), said in an interview with Hervé Bourges that he did not want to harm the spontaneity of the movement. He went on to note that it would be dangerous for the movement to attempt to organize itself into a “traditional-style political structure, even one with a new language and touched-up colours”⁸¹ Cohn-Bendit voiced a similar concern in his interview with Bourges, saying that one could not fight the bourgeoisie by mimicking its organizational structure. As a result of this belief, action committees emerged spontaneously. Cohn-Bendit extended this logic further and applied it to the March 22nd Movement’s resistance to having one group claim to coordinate all the action committees.⁸² In an interview with Jean-Paul Sartre, Cohn-Bendit again emphasized the importance of spontaneity. “Spontaneity makes possible the forward drive, not the orders of a leading group.”⁸³ He believed that the movement’s vitality emerged not from the suggestions of a certain group, but from the spontaneity of the base. If the movement were to organize into a traditional system of stating their aims and how they wished to attain them, the government would know how to deal with them. The disorder and spontaneity allowed men to speak freely, which then allowed for the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.64.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.102.

formation of self-organization. Cohn-Bendit stressed the point when he said, “it is essential first of all that people should express themselves.”⁸⁴

In the *Revolution of Everyday Life*, Vaneigem mentioned three ways in which revolutionaries would be able to secure their freedom. The first was by making information available and understandable to all. He wrote that the news should be decoded and official terms translated so that everyone may understand them. The second strategy was to allow for open dialogue. He believed intimate conversation should be promoted and forms of spectacular discussion rejected. Finally, people should make use of *sensualische Sprache*, or sensual speech. Vaneigem described this type of speech as a way in which people were able to converse directly. It is “the language of spontaneity, of ‘doing’, of individual and collective poetry...”⁸⁵ This notion goes with Vaneigem’s idea that spontaneity allows for creativity and ultimately an individual’s liberty in living out real experience.

The student movement of 1968 appears to have mimicked Vaneigem’s suggestion of a revolutionary society. The availability of information came mostly in the form of propaganda. Like most revolutionary movements, various political groups spread their ideologies and theories throughout the non-rebelling public and the rebelling public. However, the occupation of the Sorbonne offered a new and different opportunity for the uncensored dissemination of knowledge. Once the university was occupied, students took it upon themselves to establish the central courtyard as a meeting place where various groups and individuals traded and distributed literature on a wide variety of intellectual topics. It seemed to those involved that there was complete freedom of expression, which

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.103.

⁸⁵ Vaneigem, p.103.

allowed for occupiers to write on the walls and discuss topics of their choice freely in all assemblies.⁸⁶ The General Assembly that formed at Sorbonne was an example of the students' support of open dialogue. Here they hoped to afford people the opportunity to organize and express themselves. In an interview with Bourges, representatives of the March 22nd Movement articulated this and almost seemed to quote Vaneigem when they said, "The true revolution gives everyone the means to act."⁸⁷ By allowing people to contribute directly in conversations at the Sorbonne, the occupiers were also creating a means by which people could act in a revolutionary way. Participation in the occupation itself could be viewed as a form of sensual speech, as it was a type of language that involved both the individual and the collective.

There was also a more direct form of language that was used and promoted in the Sorbonne, in other occupied buildings, and throughout Paris as a whole. This language took shape in slogans, posters, graffiti, leaflets, and pamphlets that were dispersed by revolutionaries. These forms of communication showed more clearly than their text counterparts the influence that the Situationists had on the events of the movement in May.

As mentioned earlier, after the students had occupied the campus of the Sorbonne, a committee was set up to organize the occupation. Two of the most contested committees were the Coordination Committee and the Occupation Committee. The Occupation Committee had been established by the General Assembly during the first day of the occupation in order to maintain and organize the various committees that were being created. The Occupation Committee was composed of fifteen members who were

⁸⁶ Viénet, p.46.

⁸⁷ Bourges, p.79.

elected and subject to removal on a daily basis by the General Assembly.⁸⁸ According to René Viénet's retelling of the revolt and occupation, the authority of the Occupation Committee began to be usurped within the days following its creation by the 'self-created' Coordination Committee. Viénet contends that as a result of the Coordination Committee's push for power, the sound equipment's strict control under another group, and the Press Committee management over the printing press, the Occupation Committee had trouble fulfilling their roles of "the distribution of rooms and food and the democratic diffusion of written and verbal information to the maintenance of security."⁸⁹ A leaflet distributed by the Coordination Committee, on the 14th of May gives some credence to Viénet's complaint. The leaflet urged the occupiers to create their own discussion groups, but if they were to do so, they were to please inform not only the Occupation Committee, which was supposed to organize the rooms, but also the Coordination Committee, whose role was ambiguous.⁹⁰ Another leaflet distributed on the 15th of May was a proposal for the interior organization of the Sorbonne that further illustrated the advancement of the Coordination Committee's role in the occupation over the elected Occupation Committee.⁹¹ Discouragement with the Occupation Committee's limited abilities caused some of the members to leave to join other committees that still had some influence in affairs of the occupation. Except for two unnamed members, the rest of the Occupation Committee left by the 15th. It was over the next two days that Viénet says the Occupation Committee struggled to retain some sphere of influence. He

⁸⁸ Viénet, p.50.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Anonymous, "Untitled" in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p.336.

⁹¹ General Assembly, "Proposal for Interior Organization of the Sorbonne" in *The French Student Uprising: November 1967-June 1968*, p.344.

notes that on the 16th the Committee had no problem obtaining help from “the Enragés, the Situationists and a dozen other revolutionaries...” as well as “numerous volunteers from the courtyard”⁹² to reproduce and distribute occupation propaganda. Viénet reports that on the following day, the 17th of May, the Council for the Maintenance of Occupations (CMDO) was formed by those who had supported the first Occupation Committee of the Sorbonne. He contends that the CMDO was a functioning model of social democracy because there was equal participation of all members in debates and decisions. “It was essentially an uninterrupted general assembly, deliberating day and night.”

Given their past statements declaring their separation from student groups, it can be confusing to consider the influence that the Situationists had on the CMDO. Michael Seidman stated that the CMDO had been “Situationist inspired...,”⁹³ giving the council the appearance of a student group that had been created in the vein of a Situationist philosophy. However, Viénet gives evidence that the Situationists were not only an inspiration for the group, but were themselves members of the CMDO. “The CMDO was more or less constantly made up of about ten Situationists and Enragés (among them Debord, Khayati, Riesel and Vaneigem).”⁹⁴ Furthermore, in his account of the occupation, Debord wrote of his own participation within the CMDO.

The presence of these Situationists does not necessarily mean that they used the CMDO as a personal tool. As has already been shown, Viénet believed the group to be a functioning form of democracy. Also, the Situationists had a history (the case of the

⁹² Viénet, p.53.

⁹³ Seidman, p.127.

⁹⁴ Viénet, p.96.

Strasburg Scandal) of working with students who were willing to think and act on their own while still being interested in Situationist theory. It is this exact point that Viénet points to as the source of the CMDO's ability to cooperate. "Nonetheless, an almost general agreement on the major Situationist theses reinforced its cohesion."⁹⁵ Debord agreed with Viénet's view that the CMDO was comprised of independent individuals with similar goals who acted together in order to achieve their goals.⁹⁶

It is important to understand how the Council for the Maintenance of Occupations came to be and functioned because of the influence they had over the actions of the protesters, both those who were occupying the Sorbonne and those rebelling outside of it. The presence of Situationists within the group shows that they did have a vested interest in the revolt. It also demonstrates that the students, at least within the CMDO, were intentionally adopting the views of the Situationists. While the CMDO existed, it had a monopoly over the speaker system of the Sorbonne. This meant that they had a direct connection to the students occupying the university courtyard and building as a whole. The CMDO used this ability to promote messages for the continuation of the revolt. These messages could easily have bent into the rhetoric of the other revolutionary groups. However, understanding the influence of the Situationists within the CMDO illuminates certain phrases that are in line with the Situationist style. Some of these slogans can be found in the tract issued on the 16th of May by the CMDO to the students in the courtyard of the Sorbonne. The tract was titled *Slogans to be circulated by any Means*, and its authors truly meant this. They suggested spreading the slogans in the form of

⁹⁵ Viénet, p. 96.

⁹⁶ Internationale Situationniste, "The Beginning of an Era," in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 248.

“leaflets...comics – songs – painting on walls...announcements in the cinema during the film...whenever you empty your glass...before making love...”⁹⁷ This shows the attempt made by the CMDO to include revolutionary slogans in daily existence, which is closely related to the Situationists’ idea of revolution in everyday life.

The slogans put forth by the CMDO such as “Power to the workers’ councils” and “Abolish class society” can be seen as slogans in line with the ideas of Anarchism and Trotskyism. However, knowing the background of the CMDO allows for these slogans to be viewed in the light of Situationist theory. Other slogans, like “Abolish alienation” and “Down with a society based on commodity production and the spectacle,”⁹⁸ make a direct connection with the Situationists. Although Karl Marx wrote of the alienation created by capitalism, Debord and Vaneigem further discussed and expanded upon the idea of alienation in their writings. They believed the alienation of the masses was a direct result of the Spectacle that had been created by hyper-capitalism. The notion of the spectacle was a Situationist idea, and it was their intention to destroy it through revolution. There is one other slogan that embodied the theory of the Situationists, but to fully analyze it, it first is important to discuss the Situationist tactics for the dissemination of propaganda and the subversion of western society, and most importantly to understand the Situationist idea of détournement.

⁹⁷ Sorbonne Occupation Committee, “Slogans to be Circulated by any Means,” in *Writing on the Wall May 1968: A Documentary Anthology*, p.125.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

VI. Détournement

In the first issue of the *Situationist International* (June 1958), *détournement* was defined as:

Short for: *détournement* of preexisting aesthetic elements. The integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu...In a more primitive sense, *détournement* within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which testifies to the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres.⁹⁹

To the Situationists the usefulness of great literary and artistic works was found in their employment towards partisan propaganda. However, one needed to go beyond simply negating the work for the purpose of creating a scandal. This, they said, had already been done by Duchamp and the Dadaists and had unfortunately become accepted in Western society. The Situationists were calling for the negation of the negation.

To do so, any elements could be used, no matter what they were or where they came from. They did not wish to limit themselves to only correcting one work, but sought to combine parts of many. In their essay *Methods of Détournement*, Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman identified two distinct types of *détournement*. The first was “Minor *détournement*”, which was the *détournement* of an element that held no importance in itself, but only gained meaning from its new context such as a newspaper clipping or an ordinary photograph. The second was “Deceptive *détournement*”, which was the *détournement* of a significant element that would be viewed in a different manner within its new context, such as a slogan of a past revolutionary or intellectual.¹⁰⁰ In addition to the two types of *détourned* works, Debord and Wolman discussed four laws concerning *détournement*. To them, the most distant *détourned* element that contributed most

⁹⁹ Internationale Situationniste, “Definitions,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, pp. 45-46.

¹⁰⁰ Guy Debord, Gil J. Wolman, “Methods of *Détournement*” in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 10.

piercingly to the overall impression was the new work it created. This was to both grab the attention of and to engage the viewer, forcing him/her to pay attention and realize the object in a new way. As a result, the distortions of the détourned element must be as simplified as possible so the viewer could still recall the context of the elements. Détournement loses value the closer it comes to a rational reply. The more rational the détournement, the more indistinguishable it is from an ordinary witty reply. The final law was that the simple reversal of an element was the most direct, but also the least effective.¹⁰¹

Détournement, according to Debord and Wolman, leads to the discovery of new aspect of talent in conjunction with clashing against social and legal norms. As a result, they viewed détournement as a powerful weapon to be used towards true class struggle. Détournement would be the means by which the proletariat could obtain a real artistic education and was the first step toward a “literary communism.”¹⁰²

Debord and Wolman closed their essay by discussing their idea of ultradétournement, the idea that the tendencies of détournement could be applied to everyday social life. To create these, gestures and words would be given alternative meanings, creating a tendency towards play in every action and interaction. This would lead to the Situationists’ ultimate goal of détourning entire situations by intentionally changing the determinant condition of them.¹⁰³ By doing so, the purpose of the situation is devalued and subverted. Vaneigem wrote that the use of détournement in the everyday

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp.10-11.

¹⁰² Ibid., p.11.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.14.

would be nothing sort of “calculated harassment.”¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, the seriousness of everyday roles would be destroyed, and everything would be seen as a game to be played. “*Subversion*. In its broadest sense, subversion (*détournement*) is an all-embracing reinsertion of things into play.”¹⁰⁵

The use of this final form of *détournement* could be seen in the early stages of student unrest. Many of the students who interrupted lectures, such as René Riesel, vocalized their familiarity with the Situationist theory. And Debord’s and Wolman’s essay was created in 1956, giving it more than ten years to reach the hands of radical students. The radicals who interrupted their professors’ lectures could be seen as simply trying to cause unrest, or their actions can be interpreted as a form of *détournement*. They were attempting to change the foundational element of the class by destroying the authority of the professors.

The presence of *détournement* would continue to be seen in the rhetoric of 1968. In the *Slogans to be circulated by any Means*, released by the CMDO in May of that year, one slogan in particular shows the use of *détournement*: “Mankind will not be happy until the last bureaucrat has been hanged with the guts of the last capitalist.”¹⁰⁶ This slogan was also written by René Vienet on a painting in the staircase of the Sorbonne during the opening days of the Occupation. The slogan is a perfect example of deceptive *détournement* because it makes an allusion to a significant work from the past. It took a slogan from the French Revolution of 1789 and augmented it to the purposes of the current revolt. The original slogan was created by Jean Meslier and read “Mankind will

¹⁰⁴ Vaneigem, p.263.

¹⁰⁵ Vaneigem, p.264.

¹⁰⁶ Viénet, p.51.

not be happy until the last aristocrat has been hung with the guts of the last priest.” By altering this slogan, an attempt was made to connect aristocrats and clergy of the past with contemporary bureaucrats and capitalists. Furthermore, the détournement of Meslier’s slogan is an attempt to revitalize in the protesters of May and the anger past revolutionaries of France had towards those in power.

Other slogans that were painted on the walls of Paris made use of both détournement and a Situationist style, a mix of sexuality and rebelliousness. “The more I make love, the more I feel like making the Revolution; the more I make Revolution, the more I feel like making love.”¹⁰⁷ This example of graffiti shows the influence of sexuality in the revolutionary thought of May. As discussed, the Situationists viewed total sexual freedom and revolution as quintessentially the same. Every sexual act, especially those that broke with social norms, was a revolutionary one. Other propagated slogans were more explicitly sexual: “Come without obstacles,” and “I came in the cobblestones.”¹⁰⁸ The last slogan shows the use of sexuality, violence and détournement. The slogan emphasizes the excitement that one protester felt when he picked up a cobblestone to take part in the revolt. Paved streets, symbols of an affluent society the students had turned against, were now symbols of revolution. Cobblestones became a symbolic weapon of the protesters due to their abundance and availability. This symbol was used in conjunction with Situationist ideas of returning play into everyday life. One instance of this combination is seen in the graffiti “Sous les pavés, la plage.”¹⁰⁹ (Under the cobblestones, the beach). The beach, a symbol of relaxation and amusement, is covered by the

¹⁰⁷ Seidman, p.145.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Darkstar, p.4.

construction of society. In order to bring the beach to everyday life the constructions have to be removed. This removal occurs when the cobblestones are uprooted, or, in other words, revolution transpires.

Not all graffiti made use of détournement, but they did show the Situationists' influence by adopting direct quotes from their writings. This type of graffiti first occurred during the early stages of student unrest. Graffiti that read "Never Work" was found on the walls of Nanterre and paid homage to Debord's own graffiti. On March 22, the Enragés, as they departed the occupation, wrote on the walls of the administration building: "Never Work" and "Boredom is counter-revolutionary," which is a quote taken from Vaneigem's book *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.¹¹⁰ Quotes from Vaneigem's book would continue to be painted on the walls of Paris during the days of May. One such quote was "Live without dead time."¹¹¹ Vaneigem viewed life within the spectacle as being divided into lived and dead time. Dead time occurred when activity revolved around the need to "produce, consume, and calculate."¹¹² Another instance of graffiti echoes this idea: "Consume more and live less."¹¹³

"Those who go halfway down the path of revolution dig their own graves"¹¹⁴ was also seen on the walls of Paris. This quote was taken from Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just, a French revolutionary. Saint-Just was heavily quoted throughout Situationist literature. Debord, Khayati, and Vaneigem used the aforementioned quote in their theses on the Paris commune.

¹¹⁰ Seidman, p.73, as compared with Vaneigem, p.253.

¹¹¹ Viénet, p.119, as compared with Vaneigem, p.76.

¹¹² Vaneigem, p. 159.

¹¹³ Viénet, p.73.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p.60.

The posters were another popular form of propaganda that filled the streets of Paris during the revolt. The CMDO published many posters and détourned comics during the organization's life. One of the first posters to be détourned was across from the Sorbonne. The poster exhibited a young woman grasping her breasts as she exclaimed in a speech bubble "Aaaahhh!!! Situationist International!!!" Text was also added below to read, "Can the pleasures we are permitted compare with those spicier attractions, those inappreciable pleasures which are connected to the rupture of social restraints and the throwing out of laws?"¹¹⁵ The text in the speech bubble names the Situationist International explicitly, and the text below, combined with the overtly sexual nature of the poster's image, clearly echoes Situationist writings on sexual freedom.

Other posters produced by the CMDO featured revolutionary writing in the form of détourned comics. Some displayed comics whose texts came directly from the writings of Debord and Vaneigem,¹¹⁶ while other posters featured popular characters such as James Bond describing the revolutionary situation at the Sud-Aviation factory.¹¹⁷ Another example of the integration of pop culture into the revolution can be seen in the comic, "Tarzan, Jungle Cop." Translated, the comic read:

Tarzan came out of the jungle at the request of the old world order to investigate the unresolved situation. He finds the skin of the last bureaucrat hung by the workers. Capital's last protecting wall has just collapsed. 'If the proletariat unmasks those who deprive them from control of their own life, they'll find me too.' Already, comrades of the Occupation Committee participate actively in the decomposition of spectacular society by détourned comics! The game is in your hands!¹¹⁸

The comic made reference to Situationist through a number of ways. The first was the allusion to the détourned slogan of the day when the last bureaucrat will hang. The part of

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.45.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp.97-103.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.64.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.90.

the comic which mentioned the proletariat realizing who was truly in control of life can be connected to the Situationists' wish to have people understand that it was the Spectacle of which was controlling them. Finally, the mention, use, and promotion of détournement show that the writings of the Situationists were in mind when the comic was created. Parisian art students would take up the call made by the CMDO at the end of the comic and begin to produce their own détourned posters.

On May 8, the students of the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts went on strike. Their complaints echoed those of other students. They were tired of inept professors and wanted their university to be autonomous from bourgeois society. In the declaration of their intentions, the art students protested the bourgeois ideology, claiming that it promoted individual competition that corrupted creativity. They believed that bourgeois culture set artists apart from the workers by giving artists a privileged status. They wished to abolish this by participating in and creating art collectively.¹¹⁹ When they occupied their studio on the 16th of May, they wrote above the entrance “Atelier Populaire Oui. Atelier Bourgeois Non” (Workshop of the people, yes. Workshop of the bourgeois, no.) The purpose of the sign was to open the studio to all. With this action they intended to show that they did not merely want to improve the artist's situation in society but radically change it.¹²⁰

When massive protests broke out in the streets, the art students offered their assistance by producing posters for any group that supported the revolution. They also designed and created posters that appeared to have a Situationist influence. One such

¹¹⁹ Atelier Populaire, *Posters from the revolution: Paris, May 1968* (New York; Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p.4.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

poster featured a young man, his head wrapped in gauze with hypnotic swirls for eyes. Above the image the text read: “Youth disturbed too often by the future.”¹²¹ This poster can be tied to Khayati’s description of a schizophrenic youth, split between the present and the future. Another poster drew on the idea that statisticians and psychologists were only the police of bourgeois culture. One showed a head being pried with a can opener with text stating “Refusez l’intoxication”¹²² (Refuse the intoxication). Another showed a police van with “Denoncons la psychiatrie policiere!!”¹²³ (Denounce the psychiatry police) written below.

On the 15th of May, a more radical group of artistic students and protesters stormed and occupied the national Odéon Theater. In half an hour four thousand people occupied the theater and declared it closed to bourgeois audiences. Like those who occupied the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts, the Odéon occupiers opened the theater to all in an attempt to form a classless society. They denounced a system that exalted any one actor, for doing so distracted the viewer from the beauty of the art created. They refused to allow individual interviews, photos, or individual names to be reported by journalists. One slogan that was written on the walls declared, “We don’t linger on the spectacle of protest, but we protest the spectacle.”¹²⁴ This use of language shows that Situationist theory had an impact on the protestors.

Furthermore, in rejection of all things bourgeois, the occupiers of the Odéon banned performances that they viewed as “commodity-spectacles.”¹²⁵ These included

¹²¹ Ibid., p.17.

¹²² Ibid., p. 32.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 10.

¹²⁴ Seidman, p.147.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.146.

even progressive acts if the intention of the act was to garner fame. True theater, to the Odéon occupants, was lived, not performed. They encouraged actors and artists to take to the streets. Their attempt to dismantle the structure of traditional theater in favor of lived experiences demonstrated Situationist influence. By bringing their art to the public they would be creating a situation, the *ultradétournement* of everyday life. Vaneigem promoted such spontaneous acts in order to help people break from the spectacle that surrounded them. “The eruption of lived pleasure is such that in losing myself I find myself...”¹²⁶ Acts of theater in everyday life served as a good medium because they did not force the viewer to analyze everyday life but allowed them to enjoy it.

By contrast, thought directed towards lived experience with analytic intent is bound to remain detached from that experience.¹²⁷

VII. Conclusion

While some may contend that the Situationists’ influence on France’s social unrest of 1968 was limited, there is much evidence to suggest that this belief is mistaken. Although it can be suggested that the Situationists were acting separately from the majority, because some of the graffiti, posters, and leaflets produced during the revolt were made by the hands of the Situationists themselves, is also true that the sheer number of Situationist-inspired posters and the thousands of instances of graffiti were not just the work of the small group of Situationists. Such a volume of work would suggest that many anonymous individuals participated in expressing and promoting Situationist ideas.

¹²⁶ Vaneigem, p.195.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

However, the authorship of the majority of writings done during this time, whether by Situationists or by other radical elements, does not determine the scale of the Situationists' influence. It is the degree to which the Situationist radical theories were present in the public forum which provides a better gauge of their effect. The presence of their ideas in the public realm allowed Situationist thought to influence the minds of all those who came in contact with it, regardless of whether it was absorbed consciously or not. The writings, whether written by Situationists or not, helped to disseminate Situationist theories and ideas and have them become a part of the political discourse of the time.

One example of how the Situationist theories affected events during that time can be seen through the actions taken by the occupiers of the Odéon Theater. The occupiers' behaviors, their desire to break away from the bourgeois sense of what theater should be, showed that the Situationists' theories did expand beyond their small community of followers. Likewise, the attitude of the *École Nationale des Beaux-occupiers* echoed strongly the mind-set of the Situationists. Both of these groups show the use of Situationist theory in regards to the role and use of art in revolution and life; that art was meant to be an intricate part of life, not a separate entity on its own.

As previously explained, artists were not the only group to draw from the theories of the Situationist International; politicians did so as well. Leaders of the larger student groups showed their favor for the use of spontaneity as a tactic for rebellion. Additionally, hundreds of other students spontaneously formed small groups in order to make a small contribution to the revolt.

The attention that the Situationists gave to sexuality within society made yet another connection with the actions of the students. The attention given to sexuality by radical student groups allowed them to connect with a wider audience. Sexual desires were relatable to every student, whether they considered themselves political or not. By mimicking the Situationists and linking sexual repression with the culture of the bourgeoisie, they politicized the issue and brought the Situationist theory to university campuses.

In some instances it was fairly obvious to note that the links between the Situationists and the student radicals were more direct than others. The pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* offered such an example by showing of how the Situationists were directly involved in the student political environment. Other examples were less obvious, but still the link was strong. The rhetoric of students concerning the state and role of education in France showed the tie radicals had with the theories of the Situationists.

These four examples -- education, sexuality, spontaneity, and art -- offer only a few ways in which the Situationists were able to influence the rebellion of May 1968. However, these four examples do indeed show that the Situationists had a direct influence on the dialogue and events of the '68.

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