

The Internationalist Anti-Colonialism of the Situationists

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2022 marks fifty years since the dissolution of the Situationist International (SI, 1957–1972). Inseparable from the reflux of the May-June 1968 revolutionary movement in France, the end of this small but influential organization was announced through a “public circular” entitled *The Real Split in the International*, signed by Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, its last remaining members. In the course of this half-century, various individuals, informal groups, organizations, and theoretical publications in different regions of the world have claimed the heritage of the SI. The anthropologist David Graeber, for example, noted a decade ago that “the Situationist legacy is probably the most important theoretical influence on contemporary anarchism in America.”¹

However, according to Graeber, for many students engaged with “identity” issues (such as students of his at Yale University), the situationists “had almost nothing to say about racism and sexism.”² Graeber himself endorsed this view, recognizing it as “a useful corrective to the Situationist or even classical Marxist literature, which has almost nothing to say about the structures of exclusion.”³ My purpose here is not to discuss his interpretation, but to show how incorrect is the idea that the situationists ignored the problems associated with “structures of exclusion.” Fortunately, recent years have seen the appearance of research interested in still under-explored aspects of situationist history and theory, such as, for example, their thinking on gender⁴ and anti-colonialism.⁵

Concerning the colonial-anticolonial dialectic, the subject of this article, the situationists developed a double sociopolitical critique. On the one hand, their critique, centered on the “crisis of everyday life” in the capitalist metropolises, aimed at the “total decolonization” of that life, “colonized” by the spectacle. On the other hand, it denounced the illusions, in the colonies of Third Worldist ideology and the militaristic and nationalistic (therefore, statist) principles of the independence movements, such as the Algerian National Liberation Front. The idea was to criticize colonialism and anti-colonialism at the same time, in an attempt to overcome the ideological binarisms of the period and to make national liberation struggles and proletarian internationalism coincide.

The SI was an organization composed mostly of individuals from Western Europe (with only two from Eastern Europe, who were, however, living in exile in Western countries) and counted, in its 9 international sections, 61 European individuals, against only 9 non-Europeans.⁶ However, despite its ethnic composition, the SI, as its name implies, was not only an international organization, but also never gave up its *internationalism*—unlike the Third Communist International, which, *russified* by the Bolshevik party in the second half of the 20th century, came to serve as a model for the “nationalist socialism” of several “post-colonial” states.

¹ Direct Action. An Ethnography. AK Press, 2009, p. 258.

² In the text *The Class Struggle in Algeria* (1966), for example, the situationists state that “radical self-management” should refuse “any hierarchy in it and outside it,” and “reject equally, by its practice, any hierarchical separation of women (a slave separation highly admitted by Proudhon’s theory, as by the backwardness of Islamic Algeria).”

³ Op. Cit., p. 525.

⁴ Ruth Baumeister, “Gender and Sexuality in the Situationist International,” in *The Situationist International. A Critical Handbook*, ed. Alastair Hemmens and Gabriel Zacarias (London: Pluto Press, 2020), pp. 118–138.

⁵ Sophie Dolto e Nedjib Sidi Moussa, “The Situationists’ Anti-colonialism: An Internationalist Perspective,” in *The Situationist International. A Critical Handbook*, pp. 103–118.

⁶ Raspaud, Jean-Jacques; Voyer, Jean-Pierre. *L’International Situationniste. Protagonistes, Chronologie, Bibliographie*. Paris: Éditions Champ Libre, 1972.

“THE COLONIZERS WERE ALSO COLONIZED”: COLONIZATION AND DECOLONIZATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The situationist critique of the colonization of everyday life had its origins in research aimed at the surpassing/realization of art; in contact with Henri Lefebvre’s sociology of everyday life (Mustapha Khayati, a situationist of Tunisian origin, was his student at the University of Nanterre); and in the influence of some of the theses of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1948–1965).⁷ But it was developed especially through practical contact with various individuals of non-European origin who had contacts with, when they were not direct participants in, independence organizations and movements in colonized countries—Khayati himself would leave the IS in 1969 to join the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

According to Debord, the confinement of social life within the limits of a “colonized everyday life” by the spectacle blocked the possibility of a “liberation of the quotidian.”⁸ The SI aimed not, like other contemporary councilist groups—such as those which in France came out of *Socialisme or barbarie*, such as *Pouvoir ouvrier* and *Informations et correspondance ouvrières*—at a “self-management of the existing world by the masses, but at its uninterrupted transformation.” For the situationists, what was really new about the cycle of struggles of the 1960s was their aspiration, although diffuse and only partially conscious, for a “total decolonization of everyday life.” They thus tried to move anti-colonialism from the national frame of reference to the realm of everyday social relations, whose total colonization, from then on, called for a “globally pronounced critique of all geographical zones where various forms of separate socio-economic powers were established, and also against all aspects of life.”⁹

The SI opposed “language colonized by bureaucracy,” which reflects the division of society into “two main categories: the caste of leaders and the great mass of executants,” a “project of liberation of words” which envisaged a “real liberation of language.” They conceived of revolutionary periods as those “in which the masses, by acting, accede to poetry ... as evidenced by some phases of the Mexican, Cuban, or Congolese revolutions.”¹⁰ For the situationists, therefore, in the struggles for liberation of everyday life, decolonization of culture and politics, labor and language, should coincide.

Commenting on the struggles in the Congo, Debord advocated “self-management” as “the only guarantee of independence everywhere,” but only if it were “realized totally” and not just partially. And, commenting on the “Algerian half-revolution” Khayati also bet on a “dictatorship of the ‘self-managed sector’” of society that, however, should be “extended to all production and all aspects of social life.” It was a matter of unifying the so far separate programs of *total decolonization* and *generalized self-management*: “the realization of philosophy, the critique and free reconstruction of all the values and behaviors imposed by alienated social life, that is the ultimate program of generalized self-management.”¹¹

⁷ Title of the theoretical journal that also gave its name to the political group, founded in France, by Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis after a break with left Trotskyism and a rapprochement with Anton Pannekoek’s councilist theses.

⁸ “Perspectives de modifications conscientes dans la vie quotidienne,” *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 6, 1961, pp. 20–27.

⁹ “Définition minimum des organisations révolutionnaires,” *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 11, 1967, pp. 54–55.

¹⁰ “All the king’s men,” *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 8, 1963, p. 31.

¹¹ “Les luttes des classes en Algérie,” *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 10, 1966, p. 19.

“LIBERATORS MUST ALSO BE LIBERATED”: CRITIQUE OF NATIONALIST ANTI-COLONIALISM AND THIRD-WORLIDIST IDEOLOGY

The situationist critique of nationalist anti-colonialism has its roots in the anti-Bolshevik tendencies of council communism, a minority wing of the international communist movement that took place in Western Europe (especially Germany, Holland and England) during the first half of the 20th century, and which waged an uncompromising battle against the Third International's russification process, led by Lenin and the Moscow bureaucracy. The Dutch Councilist Anton Pannekoek called this current “Western Communism,” in opposition to the “Eastern Communism” of the Sino-Soviet matrix. In the synthesis of the situationists themselves, it was important to “take up again all the radicalism of which the workers' movement, modern poetry, and art in the West were the holders (as a preface to an experimental research on the way to a free construction of everyday life), the thought of the times of the overcoming of philosophy and its realization (Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx), the emancipation struggles from Mexico in 1910 to the Congo of today.”¹²

In his *Contributions to Correcting Public Opinion on Revolution in Underdeveloped Countries* (1967)¹³, Khayati accused the “bureaucratic counter-revolution,” of the Social Democrats in Germany and the Bolsheviks in Russia, of being responsible for the fact that “the colonized or semi-colonized countries had to fight imperialism alone.” For Khayati, the new regimes established in the various regions where a process of national liberation took place were no more than “forms through which the *return of the repressed* is effected,” in this case, the bureaucratic “lie” and “false consciousness”: “no matter how radical the radicalism of their leaderships, the national liberation movements *always* ended in the rise of the ex-colonized societies to *modern forms of the State*, and to pretensions to modernity in the economy.”¹⁴ Thus, the Russian and Chinese revolutions provided “the Western proletariat and the peoples of the Third World with a false model that in reality balances the power of bourgeois capitalism, of imperialism.”¹⁵

Chinese Maoism, Egyptian Nasserism, and Yugoslav Titoism were all seen by the situationists as nothing but “ideologies which announce the end of these movements,” and their recovery “by the urban petty bourgeois or military layers: the recomposition of the society of exploitation, but this time with new masters and on the basis of new socio-economic structures.” Already “Fanonism and Castro-Guevarism are the false consciousness through which the peasantry completes the immense task of ridding pre-capitalist society of its semi-feudal and colonial sequels, and of accessing national dignity, trampled on by the settlers and the backward ruling classes.”¹⁶ The ideology did not alter in any way the fact of exploitation, which continued under new forms and conditions: “in China, Cuba, Egypt, or Algeria, everywhere it plays the same role and assumes the same functions.”

In 1967, Debord would add: “The society producing the spectacle not only dominates underdeveloped regions through economic hegemony,” but “it also offers local revolutionaries false

¹² “Adresse aux révolutionnaires d’Algérie et de tous les pays,” *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 10, 1966, p. 45.

¹³ *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 11, 1967, p. 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ “Adresse aux révolutionnaires d’Algérie et de tous les pays,” *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 10, 1966, p. 45.

¹⁶ “Contributions servant à rectifier l’opinion du public sur la révolution dans les pays sous-développés,” *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 11, 1967, p. 41.

models of revolution.”¹⁷ However, the situationists did not fail to point out that there was a big difference between the Third World revolutionary movements and Russian Bolshevism, in that the latter “did not know what bureaucratic power it would institute,” while the former “could already see, in the world as at home, the bureaucratic power whose *restoration* they want, more or less purified.”¹⁸

These experiences would lead to very different results from the ones proclaimed by the Third World movements, by promoting a substitution, through dictatorial ways, of the old foreign dominant classes by new ruling classes, henceforth based on autochthonous social bases. The formation of these new classes, hybrid figures of a “bourgeoisie mixed with bureaucracy,” historically tended to the constitution of local bourgeoisies, that would no longer be characterized “by productive work, but by the organized plundering of the country.” This is a type of “bourgeoisie that *does not accumulate*, but *dilapidates*,” resembling an “underdeveloped version of the European bourgeoisie.”¹⁹ In the Congo, the defeat of the Lumumbist movement happened primarily because, by converting itself into a managerial layer, it “became independent of the masses in its own country before being effectively independent from the foreigners.”²⁰

The old colonial pillage gave way to the *indebtedness* of “post-colonial” states to foreign monopolies. Inserted into the world market in a subordinate position, these states quickly became exporters of raw materials at very low prices and importers of manufactured products at very high prices. Their place in the dynamics of international capitalism revealed the illusory aspect of the processes of national “independence” or “liberation” denounced by the situationists, in face of the systemic reality of the capitalist relations of production.

The SI advocated a revolution not only on an international scale but, fundamentally, outside of parties and the takeover of the state: “Socialism in Africa must itself completely reinvent itself, not because it *is Africa*, but because it does not yet exist anywhere! Moreover, it does not have to define itself as African *socialismo*,”²¹ just as “the emancipation movement of black Americans defies all the contradictions of modern capitalism; it need not be eschewed by the distraction of the ‘colored’ nationalism and capitalism of the ‘Black Muslims.’”²² It was a matter of fighting for a revolution that would unite the proletariat of the “three worlds,” without any primacy of one over the other.

CONGO

In 2015, the Congolese artist Joseph M’Belolo Ya M’Piku reprised the situationist perspective on the colonizing dialectic with the following formula: “The Belgians colonized the Congolese, but capitalism had colonized the Belgians at home, so they were slaves at home, slaves of the same system.”²³ In his text *Conditions of the Congolese revolutionary movement* (1966), Debord wrote in very similar terms: “One must understand that *the colonizers themselves were colonized*:

¹⁷ The Society of the Spectacle, §57.

¹⁸ “Les luttes des classes en Algérie,” 1966, p. 18.

¹⁹ Guy Debord, “Conditions du mouvement révolutionnaire congolais,” *Œuvres*. Paris: Gallimard, 2006, §5. This text, completed in July 1966, remained unknown until its publication forty years later.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, §8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, §17.

²² “Adresse aux révolutionnaires d’Algérie et de tous les pays,” 1966, p. 47.

²³ “Que devient l’avant-garde?”. *L’art même*, n° 66, 2015, p. 3.

in their own homes, in their own lives, with all this powerful activity of industrial societies that at any moment, like an enemy force, returns against the masses of workers who produce it, who never dominate it and are always dominated by it. One must also understand that *the liberators ... must themselves be liberated.*²⁴

M’Piku approached Debord in 1965, together with his friend Ndjangani Lungela. The two young Congolese men, who had benefited from the end of colonial restrictions on education in their country, were studying in Paris when they made contact with the situationists. Partisans of the rural guerrillas led by, among other Lumumbists, Pierre Mulele,²⁵ whose aim was to restore Patrice Lumumba’s regime²⁶ in the Congo, M’Piku and Lungela embraced the efforts of radicalized Congolese students to announce the decolonization process underway in their country to the whole world. Thus, while M’Piku and Lungela kept Debord informed about the situation in the Congo, Debord attempted to “transmit ... the critical level”²⁷ elaborated by the SI to the more radicalized fronts of the Congolese student movement.

However, Debord’s analysis of “the conditions of the Congolese revolutionary movement,” completed in July 1966, was not published at the time. Only Lungela was formally integrated into the International, in 1967, which did not form a Congolese national section. Even so, the collaboration of the Congolese contributed to enrich and radicalize the Situationist perspective on the colonial question that, between 1965 and 1967, occupied a central space in the review *Internationale Situationniste*.

The anti-colonial struggles in the Congo also anticipated the radical political imaginary that, in the following years, took the streets of several developed countries such as France during the revolutionary crisis of May-June 1968. Debord estimated, in his 1966 text, that “the desire to change life was the revolutionary side of the [Congolese] independence movement ... it considers that celebration, leisure, dialogue, and games are the main enrichments of society.” That same year, in the month of November, Khayati predicted, in what would become the most popular situationist text, the forms of struggle that the new revolutionary movement should assume and that, in May-June 1968, would be put into practice by its most radical fronts: “The proletarian revolutions will be *parties*, or they will be nothing, because the life they announce will itself be created under the sign of the party. The *game* is the ultimate rationality of this party, to live without dead time and to enjoy, without impediments, are the only rules it will be able to recognize”.²⁸

The SI understood that by displacing the centrality of the critique of capitalism to a critique of imperialism, nationalist socialism replaced the analysis of class struggle and social conflicts by a geopolitical analysis of the struggle between nation-states. But the Congolese revolution, inseparable from an “African revolution,” was also (and remains) inseparable from a “world revolution,” the only one capable of abolishing the division of societies into *classes*, the foundation of all divisions between races and nations. According to Debord, “The Congolese revolutionary movement is not situated in the history of *blackness*, but enters *universal history*. It is today a

²⁴ “Conditions du mouvement révolutionnaire congolais”, 1966, §7.

²⁵ Pierre Mulele (1929–1968); Minister of Education in Lumumba’s government, he led a rural guerrilla war against the regime of Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, in power since the 1965 putsch.

²⁶ Patrice Lumumba (1925–1961) was Prime Minister of Congo at the time of its independence in 1960. He was assassinated the following year after Mobutu’s putsch.

²⁷ Guy Debord’s letter to Chatterji on January 7, 1965. *Correspondance*, vol. 3, 2003, p. 15.

²⁸ On the Poverty of Student Life: considered in its economic, political, psychological, sexual, and particularly intellectual aspects, and a modest proposal for its remedy.

part of the revolutionary proletariat that will rise to the surface of all countries ... it must avenge Lumumba and Liebknecht.”²⁹

ALGERIA

Before commenting on the relations of the situationists to Algeria’s liberation struggles, recall that an Algerian, Mohamed Dahou, played an important role in the international-lettrist origins of the SI. Formed from the gathering of leftist lettrists in rupture with the artistic trend led by the Romanian Isidore Isou, founder of *lettrism*,³⁰ the Lettrist International (LI) published, between 1954 and 1957, some thirty newsletters, eleven of which were directed by Dahou (Nos. 9–18 and 20–22). Moreover, Dahou composed the organization’s “Algerian group,” which in reality never numbered more than two people.

Debord approached Dahou in 1953, a period when the members of the LI were meeting in a bistro called the Kabyle, among other Arabic cafés in the Quartier Latin in Paris, where many North Africans met to conspire for the fall of colonialism in their home countries. It was in a lettrist text by Dahou, for example, that the word “psychogeography”³¹ appeared for the first time, discovered in the wanderings (*dérives*) made at dawn, among cobblestone streets, wine bottles, and tobacco haze, which later became a method used by the situationists in their theoretical and practical critique of modern urbanism.

In July 1954, in the fourth issue of *Potlatch* (LI’s newsletter), Mohamed Dahou, Guy Debord, Michèle Bernstein, André-Frank Conord, Jacques Fillon, and Gil Wolman signed a text entitled “The Minimum Life,” in which they warned the “Algerian workers” of Renault, then on strike, that “the social struggle must not be bureaucratic, but passionate,” since it was a matter, already then, of extending the self-management movement beyond the factories and, from there, invading all the spaces of the metropolis.³² On the other hand, in his “Notes for a Call to the East,” published in the sixth issue of *Potlatch*, Dahou stated that it was necessary, in the colonies “to overcome any idea of nationalism. North Africa must free itself not only from a foreign occupation, but from its feudal masters ... Our brothers are beyond questions of border and race. Certain oppositions, like the conflict with the State of Israel, can only be resolved by revolution in both camps. We must tell the Arab countries: our cause is common. There is no West before you.”³³

In addition to Dahou, the SI also incorporated the Algerian Abdelhafid Khatib into the organization to form another national section. Despite its small size, the Algerian section of the SI played a central role in sustaining situationist internationalism. In July 1965, on the occasion provided by the military coup that brought Houari Boumédiène³⁴ to power, Khayati drafted, for the French section of the SI, the *Communiqué to revolutionaries in Algeria and all countries*. By November, this pamphlet was published in five languages (French, German, Spanish, English,

²⁹ Karl Liebknecht (1871–1919), together with Rosa Luxemburg, in 1916 founded the Spartacus League, a left communist organization. He was assassinated in 1919 in the suppression of the insurrection that began in November 1920 in Berlin.

³⁰ Avant-garde artistic movement formed by the Romanian poet Isidore Isou in 1945, just as he arrived in France.

³¹ “Le jeu psychogéographique de la semaine,” *Potlatch*, n° 1, June 22, 1954.

³² *Potlatch*, n° 4, July 13, 1954.

³³ *Potlatch*, n° 6, July 27, 1954.

³⁴ Houari Boumédiène (1932–1978) was Chief of the Armed Forces of the National Liberation Army, then Ben Bella’s Minister of Defense, before he staged a coup and assumed the presidency of Algeria in June 1965.

and Arabic) while *The Class Struggles in Algeria* resonated on Algerian territory in the month of December, and was republished in the tenth issue of the magazine of the SI in March 1966.

In this text, the situationists pointed out that the “new Algerian regime” established after the coup of June 19, 1965 confirmed the “summary analysis” that SI had made of the situation in its July 1965 pamphlet, which stated that the aim of Boumédiène’s putsch was, after all, to “liquidate self-government.” For them, Ben Bella³⁵ “fell the way he reigned: in solitude and conspiracy, for the *palace revolution*.” This was a divergent view from that presented by the French anarchist Daniel Guérin in the text *Algérie caporalisée?* (1965), which exonerated Ben Bella of any responsibility for the coup that succeeded him, which in the long run would end the experiments of self-management in the country. The multiple attacks of the Ben-Bellist government on the working masses were seen, by Guérin, as nothing more than “errors, weaknesses and shortcomings,” but whose orientation he ultimately considered acceptable. The situationists recalled that the libertarian socialist not only knew Ben Bella personally, but had also given him privileged information about the self-managed factories in the country, in a meeting held in 1963, according to Guérin himself.³⁶

Analyzing the opposition to the Algerian War on French territory, Pierre-Vidal Naquet classified them into three “ideal types” (in the Weberian sense): the Bolsheviks, the Third Worldists, and the Dreyfusards.³⁷ Sylvain Bouloque concluded, in his research on French anarchist opposition to the colonial wars (from the immediate second postwar period to the early 1960s), that the libertarian camp in that country was marked by an “interpretative polyphony” on this issue.³⁸ His study demonstrates how French “libertarian anti-colonialism,” which, despite its modest influence on public opinion at the time, played an active role in some trade union centers and civil associations for the defense of human rights, blended characteristics of the three ideal types established by Naquet in his 1986 essay.

If situationist anti-colonialism not only differed from, but above all combated the multiple forms of nationalist and socialist-based anti-colonialism existing at the time, the same is true for the anarchist-libertarian camp, as evidenced by the polemic with Guérin on the nature of the Ben-Bellist regime. In this way, it escapes Naquet’s typology and presents a more original and radical contribution to the anti-colonial struggles for the abolition of the commodity world and the spectacle. It presents, moreover, a viable theoretical alternative for disarming the logic of contemporary “culture wars,” certainly inheritors of the racisms and nationalisms that, derived from the spectacular-commodity society, the situationists attempted to combat in their time, both in theory and in practice.

³⁵ Ahmed Ben Bella (1916–2012) was Secretary General of the National Liberation Front (FLN) before becoming the first President of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria between 1963 and 1965.

³⁶ “L’Algérie de Daniel Guérin, libertaire,” *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 10, 1966, p. 80. Remember that in 1960 the situationists Debord and Michèle Bernstein signed the so-called *Manifesto of the 121* for the “right to insubmission in the Algerian War,” written by Dionys Mascolo and Maurice Blanchot, and also signed by Guérin.

³⁷ Reference to the sentencing of Captain Alfred Dreyfus for the alleged crime of treason by the French Third Republic in 1894. The “Dreyfusards” were those intellectuals who defended the accused and denounced the anti-Semitism of the French State (the captain was of Jewish descent). In the context of opposition to the colonial wars, the expression designated a refusal of politics in the name of morality, in that the libertarian Dreyfusards refused to separate the end from the means, and therefore to accept militarism and violence in the name of refusing colonial oppression.

³⁸ *Les anarchistes français face aux guerres coloniales (1945–1962)*. Lyon: Atelier de Création Libertaire, 2003, p. 11.

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