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From *Fifth Estate* #352, Winter 1999

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Guy Debord — Revolutionary
Len Bracken
Feral House, Venice, California
1997, 267 pp.

This book has so much to offer. One of its stated purposes is to make the life and writings of Debord accessible and I am happy to report that in this, Bracken has succeeded.

Debord makes for daunting reading, and those who aren't versed in the dialectical underpinnings structuring his prose or the historical events that run parallel to situationist interventions can quickly get swamped. The greatest strength of *Guy Debord — Revolutionary* is its attention to precisely these problems.

Moving chronologically through the life of his subject, Bracken periodically gives us a synchronic exegesis of the historical events informing Debord's thoughts and actions, leading one friend of mine to remark that, thanks to Len Bracken, she'd finally been able to "situate the situationists." Furthermore, Bracken does his best

to outline, in a clear, succinct manner, the critical theory informing the practice — how the ideas that make up Debord's thought evolved, his original contributions to the Situationist International (SI), and, most importantly, his conviction that critique had a vital function in making history.

This last emphasis ensures that, in marked contrast to other recent synopses, the revolutionary essence of Debord's life and activism remains front and center throughout. In this respect, Bracken's treatment is a welcome respite from the bizarre spectacle of the Situationsts being transformed into cozy commodifiable "anti"-artists in the MIT press' pseudo-radical Winter 1997 *October* art review or a gaggle of lit-crit academics competing to reduce Debord's legacy to stylistic nostrums, á la Derrida, in tomes such as *Pour Guy Debord* (Gallimard, Paris, 1996), where, in the wake of Debord's death, "All that remains is literature" (and so on, ad nauseam).

The prickly question of Debord's Marxism is also cleared up in convincing fashion. Bracken underlines that Debord was, first and foremost, a revisionist who embraced Marx's Hegelian methodology of critique but rejected his privileging of labor as the formative voice in society in favor of a revolution of desires and freedom from work.

More should have been said about the anarchist origins of this latter paradigm. In fact, Bracken's discussion of anarchism's relevance for the radical milieu of Debord's era is generally inadequate, but to be fair to him, this is a largely buried history. I should add, however, that Bracken's inattention to anarchism may account for the absence of a cogent critique of Debord's Marxist-Leninist organizational style, in which the SI functioned as a vanguard party of the proletariat and Debord as its ultra-vanguard leader. Prior to the SI's dissolution in 1972, Debord, in his capacity as Keeper of the One and Only True Faith, crippled the International by subjecting potential members to ritualistic examinations and excommunica-

tions that mimed Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and the Pope all rolled into one.

On this score, it is worth remembering Fredy Perlman's rejoinder to the sycophantic antics of two American activists who sought to join the Paris wing of the SI in 1969. Roger Gregoire and Linda Lanphear each wrote a series of letters to Perlman which they simultaneously submitted to the SI in an effort to "prove themselves worthy." Groveling renunciations of all past collaborations with "non-revolutionary elements" in one of these letters drew this response from Perlman:

> Dear Aparatchiki,
>
> Your recent letters would have meant much more if a carbon of one and the original of the other had not been sent to a functionary of the Situationist International as part of an application for membership. The logic of your arguments would be impressive if it had not been designed to demonstrate your orthodoxy in Situationist doctrine. The sincerity of your "rupture with Fredy Perlman and Black and Red" would be refreshing if it had not been calculated to please a Priest of a Church which demands dehumanizing confessions as a condition for adherence. You're a toady.
>
> The odor is made more unpleasant by the fact that you chose to approach the Situationist International precisely in its period of great purges (Khayati, Chasse, Elwell, Vaneigem, Etc.)

Perlman went on to observe that the SI was functioning like a full-fledged Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist "organization of professional specialists in 'revolution,'" complete with the "intimidations, insults, confessions, [and] purges which are necessary to keep the Coherence coherent." (This letter is quoted in Lorraine Perlman's

Having Little, Being Much: A Chronicle of Fredy Perlman's Fifty Years.)

Thumbing their collective noses at this state of affairs, Black and Red;s first English-language printing of the *Society of the Spectacle* illustrated the section where Debord denounced self-appointed centralized decision making with a group photo of the situationists.

Bracken would have done considerable service to his readers by exploring controversies such as this, in which Debord's theoretical megalomania transformed him from a libertarian revolutionary to an authoritarian saboteur, standing in the way of change for the sake of institutionalization.

Instead, toward the end of his book Bracken offers up this defense: "Given the dismay he [Debord] elicited with his exclusions and harsh judgments, it's worth remembering that his high standards of conduct were the basis for his reproaches of others, even if these reproaches strike the bourgeois observer as being less than honorable."

Bracken's claim that all critics are "bourgeois" is not only itself "less than honorable," it isn't up to scratch analytically. This is all the more surprising in light of his manifest theoretical abilities, which are amply displayed in his discussion of Debord's analysis of time and history and his searing critique of Greil Marcus' misreading of the same in *Lipstick Traces*.

Other issues — notably the glaring matter of Debord's sexism — are also glossed over. Bracken's discussion of Debord's film, *Society of the Spectacle*, for example, deals with the presentation of Debord's lover, Alice Becker-Ho, this way:

> Alice prances around the bedroom in the nude, posing and smiling for her Guy. Debord would later remark that a critic was totally erroneous in his critique of the film except in his observations that Alice was ravishing.

Its as if, in an effort to assert Debord's revolutionary credentials, Bracken suspended his critical voice in favor of slavish prostration before a Legend — and the books is far worse for it.

On the balance, however, I recommend *Guy Debord — Revolutionary* despite such shortcomings. Bracken's analysis is rich, his evaluations for the most part are subtle and intelligent, and his earnest commitment to the revolutionary agenda of Debord is refreshingly honest.