

Afterword to “The History of Ten Years”

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“The History of Ten Years”, published by the Encyclopédie des Nuisances (EdN) in February 1985, was intended to serve as the balance sheet of the “first epoch of the modern proletarian revolution” that began in 1968. According to the EdN the proletariat had successfully plunged the system of rule in several countries into crisis, but had hesitated before the magnitude of the historical task that the consequences of its action posed, thereby allowing the system to modernize and to go on the offensive, destroying the workers’ milieu and rendering a counterattack impossible. The EdN undertook an in-depth analysis of this defeat in the wake of which there remained neither any lines of demarcation with respect to the capitalist enemy, nor “irreversible general conclusions”. To the extent that spectacular domination occupied the social terrain the “subjective preconditions for the revolution” deteriorated and alienation ran amok. Along with the disputed territory, memory was also lost, and with memory, the very idea of an autonomous project of social organization. This irreconcilable critique allowed for a certain degree of lucidity that made possible not only the diagnosis of the ‘ills’ of the era, but also the search for an antidote. The EdN kept its distance from the leftist groupuscules and pro-situs who, identifying with an abstract proletariat and trusting in the imminent appearance of certain revolutionary “objective conditions”, thought they could spare themselves the trouble of understanding and assisting this process, and exhibited a wait-and-see attitude. But in this respect they were, at least with regard to this point, on the same ground as the S.I., which had justified its dissolution in a triumphalist manner: the S.I. was no longer necessary because the situationists were everywhere. The EdN approached the problem from the other extreme: as the post-May ’68 reflux showed, the situationist proletariat that rendered theoretical reflection superfluous did not exist. Furthermore, since the merger of historical consciousness and revolt against the society of the spectacle could no longer be expected as the inevitable result of the prevailing conditions, it was necessary to plunge into said reflection and work on behalf of “a unified critical point of view” that could open up perspectives for supersession. This is why the EdN acted in the following manner: instead of propagating a new critical general theory of society, it proceeded to actualize such a critique by relating it to concrete facts of discontent, protests against ‘harmful phenomena’. It thereby sought to extend the judgment passed against this world by the revolutionary theory of the preceding period, that is, by situationist theory.

By “harmful phenomena”—*nuisances*—the EdN designates not only the diverse excesses of the productive system, the harmful character of its products or the “technical” factors that threaten

peoples' lives, but also the fact of the real separation between individuals and the results of their activity, which is responsible for the execrable existence of specialists¹. The origin of this concept and of the encyclopedist perspective must be sought in the "Theses on the S.I. and Its Time", most pertinently in Thesis 17:

"Pollution and the proletariat are today the two concrete sides of the *critique of political economy*. The universal development of the commodity has been verified entirely as the accomplishment of political economy, that is to say as the 'renunciation of life'. At the moment when everything has entered the sphere of economic goods, even the water of springs and the air of towns, everything has become *economic evil*. The simple immediate sensation of the 'nuisances' and the dangers, more oppressing every quarter, which attack first of all and principally the great majority, that is to say the poor, already constitutes an immense factor of revolt, a vital exigency of the exploited, just as *materialist* as was the struggle of the workers in the nineteenth century for the means to eat..."²

Throughout its history the EdN tried to remain faithful to this line established by late situationist critique until the time it broke with the basic assumption of the compulsory revolutionary future of the "the class of consciousness". While the essentially novel character of its critical efforts distanced it from the point of view of the S.I., the coherent extremism of situationist theory led it back to orthodoxy. This was not at all to the liking of its former collaborator and occult enemy, Guy Debord, who wrote to his factotum Martos concerning issue No. 12 of the journal: "In this issue the S.I. is quoted more often than in the previous eleven issues..."³ The old truths of the sixties continued to be valid in the eyes of the EdN in the eighties, a position that is not exempt from contradictions, and concerning which an attempt was made to arrive at a resolution on the theoretical plane: thus, the destruction of the workers milieu did not signify the disappearance of the proletariat, "the greatest productive force", because "the expropriation of life exists, as well as the class struggle". These conclusions, put into question by technological development and the social atomization that put the finishing touches to the proletarian defeat, and by the irreversible character of that defeat, were confirmed again five years later in a text similar to the "History of Ten Years" entitled "Ab Ovo".⁴ The new balance sheet, however, maintained that the revolutionary project of the proletariat could not be based on the appropriation of the means of production, but on their *detournement* by the workers, as they were useless for the construction of a free life unless they were integrally transformed. Since the publication of the "Preliminary Discourse", that is, from its inception, the EdN had adhered to an anti-industrial critique, and advocated the dismantling of the productive apparatus as the historical mission of the revolutionary proletariat.

¹ "Preliminary Discourse", *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, No. 1, Paris, November 1984.

² *The Veritable Split in the International, a Public Circular of the Situationist International*, B.M. Chronos, London, 1990. (Originally published in Paris in 1972.)

³ Letter of February 29, 1988, in *Correspondance avec Guy Debord*, Paris, Le fin mot de l'Histoire, 1998. It is not at all surprising that Debord should have grasped the novelty of the encyclopedist project better than the EdN and made use of it in writing his *Commentaries*, where he assumed the total victory of the spectacle and forgot the diametrically opposed view he held in 1972. This claim is not unfounded and I expect to see it corroborated some day with the publication of the complete correspondence between Debord and the EdN, represented by Jaime Semprun and Christian Sebastiani.

⁴ "Ab Ovo", *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, No. 14, Paris, November 1989.

It was able to learn something from reading certain intellectually honest authors, not connected with the radical milieu but knowledgeable in the development of this critique (Ellul, Charbonneau, Mumford, etc.). Following the trail blazed by Hannah Arendt⁵, the EdN defined this society as the society of atomized masses and spectacular democracy as the new edition of the totalitarian system, without police terrorism or Nazi party, and, although not without difficulty, linked these themes to the usual concept of the proletariat, the typical element of class society, completely unlike the proletarian class that exists today. But the existence of the proletariat was guaranteed by a new definition: it was the subject of the struggles against harmful phenomena, characterized by the ideologists of domination as struggles “for defense of the environment” or ecological struggles. Having disappeared from the factories, the class struggle survives in this new form. The outbreaks of anti-nuclear contestation and the general crisis of the bureaucracy, as manifested in the collapse of the soviet system, the Chinese revolt and the exciting setbacks suffered by the Polish communist party, encouraged optimism, but the EdN stuck to their guns with or without optimism, trusting to the prospect of a collective formation of a critical point of view in the struggles against harmful phenomena, and although it no longer viewed situationist theory as “nothing but the general expression of the real historical movement”, it did consider it to be “a minimum” that must be reinforced and developed. This back-and-forth with the S.I. was typical of the EdN throughout its history. It was capable of posing the social question on its real historical coordinates and was even able to supply some unacceptable ideas to the era, but the prestige of the most radical theory of its time was more than it could encompass. For the members of the EdN, situationist theory was not a closed system of knowledge that had its place in a past epoch, with great merits but undergoing a process of recuperation by the dominant system, but rather, as Hegel would say, a valid theory which, by being chronologically the latest, resulted from all its precedents and contained all their principles. Although traces of a *different* objective critique are to be found in every issue of their journal, and this is how they understood and denounced their enemies, the only critical analysis that it expressly published was largely *ad hominem*; it refers to the practice of the S.I. rather than to the logical insufficiencies of a theoretical type that appeared in response to a completely new situation⁶. Harmful phenomena were defined as the final contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, and the struggle against harmful phenomena was transformed into a reworked version of the class struggle. With this rescue operation by transference the evidence that the classical workers movement had died out was circumvented, along with the evidence that subsequent struggles would suffer the consequences of this defeat and would necessarily be weak and limited. A class cannot be reconstructed almost *ex nihilo* and much less become the central force that could paralyze society. What appeared as minor contradictions in the “History of Ten Years” became ideological obstacles in “Ab Ovo”. This error would be manifested in practice (the encyclopedists always were more activists than theoreticians), as it was soon *directly* proven that the struggles against harmful phenomena were easily recuperated by ecologists, local politicians and municipal representatives, preventing the participants from being exposed to the least bit of revolutionary critique; proof of the absolute lack of class consciousness in the environmental crisis. Of course the proletariat exists, perhaps it is more numerous than ever; but it does not exist in the form of a class. Because it was dispersed in mass society it ceased to exist

⁵ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken Books, New York, 1951.

⁶ “Abrégé” (“Compendium”), *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, No. 15, Paris, April 1992.

“for itself”, it disavowed its truth and was in no position to recover it in any struggle. Proletarianized, expropriated individuals found themselves locked into the miseries of their private life, and this voluntary seclusion was so profound that no general interest, no class interest, could crystallize from so much particularity. The great success of domination was the *total separation* of individuals, the basis of modern capitalism and political fascism. The new “working class”, the proletariat that suffers the effects of harmful phenomena and knows it, can only be the abstract negation of the renovated and transformed ruling class, but it is by no means a real historical subject. The EdN was not mistaken when it postulated harmful phenomena as the essence of commodity production and called attention to the principally noxious character of separation; its error consisted in having confronted such evidence with the hopes it placed in proletarian recomposition. The enigma of the proletariat was resolved later, when the EdN was no longer an organized group and was only sporadically active. In the nineties, the new era fully illuminated the real scope of the dispossession and misery of individuals, which was barely discernable ten years before. Situationist subversion was recuperated with impunity by the cultural and media apparatus of domination and transformed into “the last form of the revolutionary spectacle”⁷. Through its analysis of the strikes of December 1995 in France the EdN encountered a proletariat that was a spectator of itself, whose struggles took place within the communications media and were managed by the employees of the latter. The EdN posthumously broke with the situationist tradition and went beyond it, denouncing a virtual class struggle, a media phenomenon and a mass spectacle.⁸

All the evidence indicates that the ruling unreason has run its course and has finished building its world. The social terrain upon which critical reflection could be born is disappearing rapidly along with the likelihood of the emergence of a historical subject that could initiate such reflection. The revolution, securely contained by the mechanisms of recuperation, is no longer scandalous. Since the gestures of revolt have become commodity values, revolt is impossible. The terrain is ripe for any sort of aberrant ideology, and it has been noted that there is a need for a radical critical theory that would help us grasp reality and elucidate a strategy to transform it that is neither ambiguous nor fundamentalist, but given the sad condition of individuals subjected to the imperatives of the economy, and taking into account the currently operative mechanisms of repression and control, the crucial issue will no longer be interpreting the world but surviving in the extremely alienating conditions that rule it; when a ship is sinking a treatise on navigation is of less interest than knowing how to build a life-raft. To save oneself from the destructive and homogenizing steamroller of global capitalism, under present circumstances, one will need, as Jaime Semprun says with a touch of ironic humor, a manual on gardening.⁹ The degeneration of human beings has reached the point where it is hard to imagine that the world will end up in anything else than barbarism, when, if we take a moment to think about it, we are already being immersed in it. There is an urgent need for tactics of immediate resistance, the circulation of ideas, the safeguarding of public debate, the practice of effective solidarity, the affirmation of the subversive will, the preservation of personal dignity, secession from the world of the commodity, the preservation of memory, the maintenance of a minimum of autonomous critical speech... that is, everything that preserves some light in the chaos and neutralizes the

⁷ Letter from Debord, “To all the Situationists”, January 28, 1971, in Volume 4 of Debord’s *Correspondance*, published by Fayard, Paris, 2004.

⁸ “Observaciones sobre la Parálisis de Diciembre”, *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, Paris, 1996.

⁹ “El Fantasma de la Teoría”, Jaime Semprun, in *Nouvelles de nulle part*, No. 4, September 2003, Paris.

recuperators. In the best case, the revolutionary critique will emerge, and in the worst, it will not matter whether it emerges or not.

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