

Dis-organizing Utopia

An analysis of the Situationist International

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In this paper I will be looking at the revolutionary, heretico-Marxist organization the Situationist International. I will be focusing my attention on two episodes in the organization's turbulent and somewhat chaotic history. First off I will look at the 'Italian Purge', the early expulsion of several leading – Italian – members of the organization. Second, I will focus on the resignation of the Danish artist Asger Jorn, one of the founders of the Situationist International and his subsequent attempts at continuing his work under the assumed identity of George Keller.

As mentioned, the Situationist International saw itself as a revolutionary avant-garde (in the most Marxist sense) organization. Based mainly in France, it lived through some of the country's – and the continent's – most turbulent years, years where so-called 'revolutionary situations' - in Marxist theory moments where massive socio-political change is possible - were plentiful to say the least. Nonetheless the Situationist International did not manage to seize these moments and bring about the desired revolutionary change to its surroundings. It could be argued that all it really accomplished was its own destruction, the dis-organizing of its own Utopia. I hope that by looking at the two aforementioned cases, I can bring about at least a partial explanation of this failure.

Who were the Situationists?

Founded in 1957, the Situationist International was an organization composed of left-wing intellectuals and artists in particular, adhering to a quasi-Marxist analysis of the capitalist bourgeois society. The organization combined classical Marxist teachings, especially the concept of dialectical materialism with the analysis, put forth by the French critic Guy-Ernest Debord in particular, of the existing society being a 'society of the spectacle'.

The aim of the Situationists was not a restructuring of the existing society. The bourgeois society of the spectacle was not only flawed, by its very structure it supported the existing, unfair, social order – its very raison d'être was the support of this unfair order - and thus it had to be completely dismantled, so that a new society, founded on principles of equality, freedom and fulfilment of the individual's desires, could emerge from the ashes of the old order.

Based on this analytical foundation the Situationist International was founded by merging the Lettrist International, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the (allegedly fictional) London Psychogeographical Society. Avant-garde in the traditional Marxist-Leninist sense, it was always a small organization: in its 15 years of existence it had a total number of 76 members.

Inherent weaknesses – presentation of preliminary analytical focal points

The Situationist International existed in turbulent times. In its fifteen years of existence, it experienced both Charles de Gaulle's coup d'état-like rise to power in France in 1958 and the massive social upheavals ten years later. Both these episodes can clearly be called 'revolutionary situations' in the Marxist sense and, as Danish art critic Mikkel Bolt points out in his article *Statskuppets former (The Forms of the Coup d'état)* from 2005, the Situationist International - at least to a certain degree – viewed them as such.

The question then is: if these situations were really revolutionary, then why did the revolution not take place? The Situationist International certainly had ambitions in this direction - and it shared these ambitions with other left-wing groups of the day. The focus here will be on why the Situationists failed - and how this failure is related to the later collapse of the organization.

As mentioned, I will try to make these points clear by looking closer at the so-called Italian Purge and Jorn's resignation. However, before getting to that point, I will present a few more general claims that will guide the following analysis.

The Legacy of the Comintern

The Situationist International from its very beginnings made it very clear, that it was equally opposed to the capitalist west and the communist parties (both the mother-party in the east and its offshoots in the west). Situationist analysis claimed that they were equally opposed to individual freedom, the basic demand of Situationist ideology.ⁱ

Even so, it could be argued that the Situationist International inherited many elements of the practical organizational forms from the communist parties and especially from their collective organization - The Communist International or Comintern.ⁱⁱ

Not only did the Situationist International share the Comintern's 'structuralist fetish' with national branches, central committees, international congresses and all the resulting bureaucracy.ⁱⁱⁱ Just as the Comintern, the Situationist counterpart always used expulsions as

response to any internal dissent or disagreement. Whenever the organization was in disagreement, whether on the subject of tactics or analysis, the answer was always to expel the weaker faction - no matter if this was an individual or - as I will show later - an entire national wing.

In this respect, the Situationist and Communist Internationals were very much alike - and they both faced the same consequences: even though their philosophical foundations may have been dialectics (in which disagreement or conflict is an essential element) this disagreement was banned and the natural consequence was petrification - both analytically (if any dissent means expulsion, there is no room for new theoretical impulses) and strategically.

Art as conservatism

The Situationist International originated in artistic milieus, its members were either artists themselves or at least art critics of some sort along with their philosophical and political practice.

Even so, the Situationist International from its beginnings was somewhat sceptical with regards to the revolutionary power (or even potential) of art. Originating in a criticism of contemporary bourgeois art, the Situationists soon became sceptical of art as potentially critical practice as such. Instead of claiming that some works of art did have critical ('situationist') potential, large parts of the organization came to believe, that works of art could never contain the critical potential they hoped for.

Their argument was that the critical art would always be recuperated by the bourgeois society - that it was simply impossible to create a critical work that could not be turned against its own ideological foundations by the capitalist society of the spectacle. The only reasonable consequence of this analysis of the (lack of) power of art was to simply abandon artistic expression in favour of other ways of action. For an organization composed of artists, this was naturally a disastrous development.

Everything is recuperated

This final issue is founded on the combination of the two issues described above. When the organization on one hand develops an ever-increasing scepticism or fear of its own actions and on the other hand - due to its own organizational weaknesses - is incapable of shaking itself free of this scepticism, it will probably simply continue down the same path.

This was what happened to the Situationist International. After having abandoned art as critical practice they became increasingly sceptical of other forms of action - down to the

point where - according to Mikkel Bolt - the organization could no longer put forth arguments for doing anything except writing critical analyses of the society of the spectacle:

“Therefore any activity that was true to the original intention of art now had to reject being art. This conclusion meant that the Situationists increasingly refrained from working creatively for fear of being swallowed by the institution of art and the society of the spectacle. [...] Therefore the Situationists fled from art and spent the rest of their existence almost desperately avoiding recuperation.”^{iv}

If the organization’s analysis was sound - and it had no way of claiming anything else - there was simply no way that same organization could act on its own analysis.

There are, of course, other reasons why the Situationist International didn’t succeed. That should be just as self-explanatory as the fact that it was not the only organization that failed in an attempt to turn the upheavals of 1958 and 1968 into genuine revolutions. As such, this analysis targets only a fragment of a fragment of a much larger history. My following analyses of the two cases should be seen in this light - not as exhaustive in any form, but as partial analyses of fragmentary cases.

First case: The Italian Purge

The Situationist International was founded in 1957 in Italy. One half of the founders were Italians. The organization was founded in the villa of one of these Italians. Based on this, it would be fair to assume that the Italian wing would become a major player in the construction and work of the organization.

That was not going to be the case. Already at the second conference of the Situationist International (January 1958), disagreements broke out between the Italian members and Guy-Ernest Debord, then and later a leading member of the Situationist International. It is unclear what the disagreement was actually about, but the conclusion was quite clear: the Italian Situationists Walter Olmo, Elena Verrone and Piero Simondo - who were all present at the foundation of the organization - were expelled. Within two years of this incident all other Italian members of the Situationist International had either resigned or were also expelled from the organization. An entire national branch, when looking at their numbers and comparative representation at the founding meeting arguably the strongest branch after the French, had been purged from the organization.

In my opinion we can draw two conclusions from this very early incident:

First off none of the founding members (at least of the non-Italians) were in any way estranged by the idea of expelling dissenters, no matter what role these members had hitherto played in the organization or - I would claim - what this expulsion would mean to the organization and its ability to act (it is clear that starting the process of expelling an entire national branch as its first activity would put an enormous strain on the organization and its ability to actually act politically).

Second off it should be clear that from the very beginning the Situationist International - even though it was a small organization - was comprised of parties with so wildly diverging opinions that they could not realistically be reconciled - especially not in an organization bent on ridding itself of dissent.

Both these facts would haunt the organization throughout its history, one round of expulsions would follow another and arguably the Situationist International ended up spending more time ridding itself of dissenting Situationists than actually practicing Situationism (if it is even possible to speak of such a thing).

Therefore it seems relevant to evolve a little on the historical background of the preliminary claims as to why the Situationists were so keen on expulsions.

The un-intimate bureaucracy

As already mentioned, the Situationist International shared this willingness with its ideological opponent the Comintern. However, the Situationist International also, despite its comparatively diminutive size, shared a number of structural aspects with the Comintern. On an organizational level the two were, if not similar, then structured according to the same logic, both have the form of 'Internationals' with national departments, a supranational governing body with absolute power over the organization^v and international congresses.

To the casual observer this structural similarity may look like a classic Situationist prank, a satirical way of pointing out the double standards of the Comintern. This may very well have been the aim of this structure, but the fact is that the mechanisms were put into use by the Situationists in much the same way as the Comintern used the same mechanisms: to exclude individuals or larger groups of members.

When combined with the fact that the Situationist International was always a very small organization (at most times it would have fewer members than the Comintern had member parties) an odd and somewhat unnatural way of communication must have evolved within the organization.

In his book *Networked Art* American art critic Craig Saper talks about avant-garde artists creating “intimate bureaucracies” with the purpose of mocking the bureaucracies of the real world (fake post stamps, small magazines, non-existent organizations etc.). In the case of the Situationist International I would claim that there arose a kind of un-intimate bureaucracy. It seems to share many of the characteristics of Saper’s definition except that the participants were very serious about their creation and actually used it in their internal struggles. Whether this was ‘simply’ an organizational flaw or a Situationist prank on the loose may be impossible to determine but it seems obvious that this over-structuring and depersonalization made the many purges easier.

Dialectical legacies

The Situationists may have rejected existing Marxist organizations such as the communist parties (they even called them counter-revolutionary) but they did inherit both philosophy and ideology from Marx and Hegel before him.

As correctly pointed out by Mikkel Bolt an important philosophical legacy for the Situationist self-image was the idea of being avant-garde. With the dialectical philosophers in their baggage they could place themselves and their ideology (they would of course call it ‘analysis’) at the spearhead of history. As the tendency has been in the history of left-wing political organizations, they insisted on the ‘objectivity’ of their ‘analysis’ and thus on their role as the leading avant-garde.

With this somewhat totalitarian foundation, it is no wonder that excluding dissenters seemed an acceptable approach.

Surrealist legacies

Several scholars have pointed to the familiarity between Situationism and Surrealism. Debord himself wrote about the relationship, agreeing with Surrealist analyses and to a certain degree with Surrealist ideology but - as an omen of things to come - criticizing their focus on aesthetics in lieu of political action.^{vi}

If we see the Surrealists as forerunners of the Situationist International we may find another reason for their willingness to use the exclusion tool. The Surrealist movement was also plagued by internal strife through much of their history and the leading figure André Breton himself both publicly attacked and excluded the majority of the members.

The only notable difference between the exclusion practices of the two organizations would seem to be, that the Surrealists - with Breton spearheading this tendency were more eager to

fight their battles in public whereas the Situationists dealt with most of their disagreements internally - with Asger Jorn's resignation, allegedly done while being in full accord with the aim and analysis of the organization, as the prime example.

As we can see the purges that took place within the Situationist International were by no means just random accidents. Rather the organization placed itself within a historical and philosophical tradition where purges and exclusions were the order of the day rather than a new invention.

The combination of a dialectical objectivism, the alienating structure of the un-intimate bureaucracy and the fact that their predecessors practiced the same methods in this case proved lethal for the organization. Once the Purges had begun with the Italians, they could not be stopped. At the same time many members left the organization (more or less) voluntarily. The purges reached such a momentum that it seems impossible that the organization ever came to function properly. A look at the member lists might make this point clearer.

According to one list^{vii} the Situationist International had 76 members during its 15 years of existence. Of these 76 members, 48 - more than two-thirds - were expelled during the life of the organization. A further 22 resigned more voluntarily leaving just six members who did not either resign or were expelled. Of these final six members just one - Guy-Ernest Debord - was involved in the founding of the Situationist International.

I have chosen to call this paper *Dis-organizing Utopia*. This small example shows why. The Situationists simply tore themselves apart due to internal strife and disagreements. Instead of adapting theory and practice to the changes to surrounding society, the Situationists spent their time with internal conflicts, eventually leading to the total petrification of the organization, both analytically and practically.

Second case: Jorn's resignation

The second case is an example of one of the disagreements that haunted the Situationist International, probably the most important one. It concerns the already mentioned disagreement over the critical potential of avant-garde art.

In 1961 Asger Jorn, one of the founders of the Situationist International, left the organization. As already noted he did not make much noise when leaving. Instead he declared himself in full accord with the goals of the organization. Still he chose to engage himself in the newly founded Bauhaus Situationniste and the Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism. In

both cases his involvement was far more discreet - he played no significant role in the public. Also, he did not leave the Situationist International right away; instead he continued working within the organization and still published articles, now under the assumed name of George Keller until he finally left the organization a little less than a year later.

Why did Jorn leave the Situationist International? And why did he nonetheless continue working within the organization - and then later left altogether?

What is an artist without art?

According to American art critic Karen Kurczynski and others the Situationist International was fundamentally divided on the subject of what role art could play as critical instrument, a divide where Jorn and Debord were the emblematic figures.^{viii} Jorn continually insisted on the critical potential of avant-garde art (he did agree with the critique of classic or bourgeois art) whereas Debord became increasingly sceptical to the point where he lost all hope that art could avoid the dreaded recuperation by the hands of the society of the spectacle.

As the Situationist International started leaning towards rejecting critical art as a viable political way of action it became clear that they could only draw one conclusion from this analysis: artistic practices would have to be abandoned in favour of other forms of political action, they would have to develop new strategies that would not so easily be recuperated.

As clear and consistent as this conclusion was, just as clear was the consequence that if Jorn (and others with him) wanted to continue his artistically practice, he could not stay affiliated with the organization. An artist working within an organization that rejects artistic practice simply doesn't make sense.

Jorn was not alone in leaving the organization for these reasons. Several artists parted ways - more or less voluntarily - with the Situationist International for the same reasons. But what happens to an organization comprised of artists when it abandons artistically practice?

According to Mikkel Bolt it was a disaster.^{ix} When the artists gave up their expressive forms they lost their ability to express their analysis, to put it into action. The somewhat paranoid fear of being recuperated paralysed the Situationist International - the Situationists came to fear the consequences of their actions so much that they ceased to act at all.

A man called George Keller

As already mentioned Jorn did not leave the Situationist International immediately. He stayed, 'incognito' so to speak, and worked under the assumed identity of George Keller. Why did he

do this? There is an interesting parallel between this new form of engagement in the Situationist International and his affiliation with the Bauhaus Situationniste offshoot group that may point to an answer. In both cases Jorn was very discreet; he now worked under assumed identity in the Situationist International, in the Bauhaus Situationniste his name rarely figured, whether as author or elsewhere.

The common trait here is the focus on hiding or even erasing the name Asger Jorn. It seems more likely that Jorn was interested in erasing his artistic identity - the signature at the bottom of the canvas - rather than actually dissolving the person Asger Jorn.

According to Karen Kurczynski this dissolution of the artist-genius, a concept inherited through Surrealism from Romanticism, was seen by Jorn as a necessary step towards the liberation of humanity via the overthrow of the society of the spectacle (as far as dissolving the concept of the individual genius, he actually seems to have been in full accord with Situationist ideology).

It is worth noting that this hope of deconstructing the artist individual and all that is related to it (celebration of individualism, (intellectual) property rights and so forth) was not a new concept for Jorn. He had already sketched out the idea in his *Intimate Banalities* from 1941 and further evolved on the idea in the following years - without ever reaching any definitive analysis or strategy on the subject.

Karen Kurczynski elaborates on this point in her paper on Asger Jorn and his relation to the avant-garde movements:

“Jorn, on his side, welcomed the popular creativity exactly because it was impure, because it went across specialised fields, because it contained an inner social orientation and because it went against artistic taste and rejected individual talent. The conception of popular creativity found in Helhesten and Cobra originated in the notion that if anyone is given access to artistic production and experience, originality and genius will vanish as remainders of the bourgeois society’s obsolete conception of what art is.”^x

Still, as mentioned, Jorn did not continue his affiliation with the Situationist International. After less than a year 'George Keller' also ceased working with the organization. This probably shouldn't be regarded as a failure of the George Keller-experiment as such, rather it can be seen as a testament to the fact that the Situationist International at this point had completely given up on the arts. No matter if Jorn's experiment was successful or not, the Situationist International was no longer the proper forum for experiments with the institution

of art, no matter how radical these experiments were.

As Karen Kurczynski points out, by the end of 1961 the artists had finally lost the struggle over the Situationist International: *“In Göteborg, 1961, the exclusion of the artists was completed and Raoul Vaneigem declared that there was no such thing as a situationist work of art.”*^{xi}

We cannot, I would claim, judge the George Keller case based on how long 'he' remained with the Situationists, simply because the project wasn't related to that particular organization. Instead it should be seen as a sort of forerunner for similar, later, experiments with the artist persona and its relation to the art institutions.

Seen in this perspective, George Keller has more in common with Neoist 'open source pseudonyms' such as Monty Cantsin or Karen Elliot - both were invented with the specific goal of undermining the position of the individual author or artist in favour of a more communal approach to the creation of art.^{xii} In this light the most likely contemporary successor to the experiment would be the Danish art concept (rather than concept artist) Das Beckwerk, a 'company' that under the direction of a board and the manager "Værkfører Nielsen" (The Works Manager Nielsen) are tasked with handling the artistic legacy of the allegedly deceased artist Claus Beck-Nielsen.

In conclusion

As mentioned in the opening remarks, it has not been the aim of these few pages to give an exhaustive explanation for the failures of the Situationist International. It is quite likely that the stubborn and overly idealist insistence on practically constructing and implementing their Utopian vision was the main reason that the Situationists failed so bitterly. This stubborn insistence on holding the absolute truth hindered cooperation with other groups with converging ideologies and that probably isolated the International.

But the internal dis-organization or even self-destruction did play a major role. This together with the gradual shift away from critical artistic expression (with all the very real problems that came along) was crucial to the gradual descent into paranoid apathy where only analysis and criticism were allowed or possible^{xiii} - an apathy so complete that according to Mikkel Bolt they were unwilling to see the upheavals of 1968 as anything more than a large-scale détournement; at the one point where the desired revolution seems to have been within reach they could no longer see it.^{xiv}

In the end there is a certain tragic irony to the fact that the Situationist International was struck

and struck down by the same ideological paralysis that later destroyed one of its two primary enemies, The Soviet Union, while the other major opponent, Capitalist West, seems to have finally overtaken and recuperated its core elements:

On one hand, today *détournement* in many causes seems to be little more than a clever marketing strategy. On the other, the key concepts of the society they so desired, playfulness and freedom of desire, seem to be the slogans of the hegemony of the so-called cognitive capitalism of today.

Bibliography

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5. Saper, Craig: *Networked Art*, University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

i Statskuppets former p. 83.

ii Of the few things that Marx actually wrote about organizational issues and practices (he always was a theoretician rather than practitioner) even fewer were implemented - this is the reason for talking about a Comintern rather than just a Marxist legacy.

iii A bureaucracy that I would call a kind of 'quasi-bureaucracy'. For an organization this small it seems utterly bizarre to maintain the number of internal divisions, titles and branches. Rather than supporting individual freedom, this seems to put unnecessary strains on the individual's ability to act within the organization.

iv Den situationistiske avantgarde: p. 164. My translation.

v This body was arguably more genuine in the case of the Situationists, as the Comintern in reality was controlled by the Soviet Communist Party, the CPSU, while maintaining a superficial democratic structure.

vi Den situationistiske avantgarde p. 160.

vii This actual list (compiled from the Situationist Archives of <http://notbored.org>) may not give the precise and exact numbers. For example, while this list adds up to six members when the organization was dissolved, elsewhere it is claimed that there were only three. While the precise numbers may be unclear, I will still claim that the conclusion is sound.

viii Asger Jorn og avantgardebevægelserne p. 144.

ix Den situationistiske avantgarde p. 164.

x Asger Jorn og avantgardebevægelserne p. 139. My translation.

xi Asger Jorn og avantgardebevægelserne p. 145. My translation.

xii Networked Art p. 50.

xiii Den situationistiske avantgarde p. 166.

xiv Interventionskunstens lære p. 230.

