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| Ecocide or Revolution:  Ecological and Environmental Themes in Situationist Thought |
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**Abstract:**

Despite increasingly widespread recognition of imminent negative environmental impacts on human civilization brought about by anthropocentric climate change, leading states and their leaders have taken only small and limited steps to address the problem. This paper seeks to understand this apathy and paralysis by exploring the place of environmental thought in the situationist movement in France. Of particular interest is the place of environmental consciousness in the larger situationist movement and whether any thoughts or insights on these matters are applicable to the present-day crisis of climate change and its effects. After discussing this, the paper will employ some of the perspectives expressed by the leading situationist thinker Guy Debord in his work *A Sick Planet* to argue that in a hyperreal “society of the spectacle” in which most politics now operates, the priority of most political actors is to appear to do something about the threat of the destruction of the biosphere rather than actually solve the problem in a substantive way.

***Introduction***

An emerging consensus on the reality of catastrophic climate change has slowly emerged in the past decade. Entrenched representatives of the status quo, including a majority of self-identified members of the Republican Party, now acknowledge the existence of a warming planet.[[1]](#footnote-1) Meanwhile upstart radical voices like newly elected Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are backing policy proposals like the “Green New Deal” that, unlike in the past, are not dead on arrival in the halls of power.[[2]](#footnote-2) Yet despite the broad acknowledgement that a problem exists, concrete measures like significant cuts in emissions by industrialized nations, overhauls of electric power grids toward renewable energy platforms, and encouraging consumers in the western world to change to a more sustainable diet and lifestyle have been meagre and unimpressive.[[3]](#footnote-3) The feeble response to this crisis becomes even more problematic given that many who have closely studied the problem of climate change argue that time is quickly running out before permanent damage is done.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet no matter how dire the situation is rendered by scientists and activists, apathy and passivity remain the common reaction to a sick planet.

This paper seeks to understand why this apathy persists despite the grim prognostications of environmental academics and experts. To do this, the paper will draw from a unique and often overlooked strand of radical social and cultural theory that emerged in Europe in the middle of the 20th century called “Situationism.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Expressed primarily by the French rabble-rouser Guy Debord, this situationist ethos was a set of ideas and attitudes that undergirded the rebellious spirit of the 1960s culminating in the Paris Spring of 1968. Some of the key elements of this movement, including the concept of psychogeography, the idea of alienation in advanced capitalist society, and most importantly, an all-consuming “spectacle” that dictated the conditions of everyday life for most of the people around the world, are essential for understanding the paralysis of the present day political milieu and the inability for states and the institutions of global governance to effectively address the key challenges of today’s environmental crises. More importantly, as this paper will argue, much situationist thought, especially as it pertains to the qualities of present-day consumer society, suggests the only possible genuine solution to these problems cannot be found in incremental reforms of technocratic problem-solving that are common among status quo thinkers and decision-makers that boast having an environmental “conscious.” Instead, a radical rejection of consumer capitalism and the “society of the spectacle” offer the only hope to survive the coming climate calamities. In short, the world has a single choice—ecocide or revolution.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The paper will make these arguments in three steps: 1) Laying out the core principles of the situationists of the late 1950 and early 1960s and placing them in the larger context of an ascendant critical theory of society. This portion of the paper will also briefly discuss the situationists rejection of the philosophy of environmentalism as part of a larger radical agenda during the Paris Spring of 1968; 2) discussing the key ideas in Guy Debord’s *A Sick Planet*—the one document produced by the situationist movement that explicitly addresses environmental issues; and 3) a brief discussion of how certain situationist ideas about the shortcomings of representative democracy in an age of spectacular consumerism explain why little to no progress has been made in making any meaningful change to address the problems of the current ecological crisis. The discussion will focus in particular on the *gilets jaunes* movement in France and why the attempts by the government of Emmanuel Macron to deal with the challenges of climate change not only result in no meaningful solutions, but actually make the situation worse both in political and social terms.

***Politics, Environment and the Situationists before 1968***

The Situationist International came into existence in 1957 around Guy Debord and a colorful mix of half-famous artists, provocative poets, and writers published in niche journals who proudly spent as much drinking and rabble-rousing as they did in any kind of disciplined creative work.[[7]](#footnote-7) Though clearly of a leftist political orientation, the group could be better described as heterodox as it did not claim any real affiliation with a particular school of thought or belief system nor did they seem interested in giving birth to one of their own—indeed, much of what brought them together was their propensity for lounging around at cafes and having engaging and intense discussions or arguments about often obscure thinkers and ideas. Most importantly, they were utterly free of any institutional or academic affiliations that typified leftist thought at the time, which from their perspective allowed them to escape the suffocating and stultifying intellectual environment of the mid-twentieth century academic orthodoxies.

Of keen interest to the situationists was what they saw as the boring conformity taking shape around them—and the rush of so many people to partake in its dour rituals including careerism, nuclear families and suburbanization. The binding consensus among the group was that these trends in society marked a moment when human creativity and the progress of humankind in general had reached a point of permanent paralysis.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the artistic world especially, traditions like Dadaism and surrealism that were once seen as edgy and radical had lost their ability to shock, disturb and trigger the imaginings of a better world, while in the realm of poetry and literature the creative contestation of language and the meanings of words was becoming increasingly formalized under the auspices of a smothering conventionality enforced by a rigid bureaucracies like universities and government agencies.[[9]](#footnote-9) The result was a prevailing sense of sullenness and ennui disguised by the bright lights and material progress of a European economy finally recovering from World War II. But instead of genuine human advancement stimulated by the elimination of economic want, individuals and families in Europe and the United States were moving into a homogenous conformity of mass produced suburban housing, endless traffic jams, and dreary office jobs betrayed by their subconscious fantasizing about living a more exotic life akin to the celebrities they followed in magazines and on television programs.

The slide of society into a world of pacified consumers living in a world described by Herbert Marcuse as a “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom” fits reasonably well into a core element of critical theory concerning a particular understanding of history and human progress.[[10]](#footnote-10) Drawing from the dialectical traditions of Hegel and Marx and mixing a healthy portion of Freudian psychoanalysis, the critical theory of the twentieth century took as its research project an exploration of social movements that supported irrational and anti-intellectual forms of rule. Focusing initially on the rise of Nazism (many of the original Frankfurt School academics were Jewish refugees fleeing Nazism before World War II), the project turned its analysis to western societies after the end of World War II and the persistence of the bourgeois capitalist assemblage of power despite its obvious tensions and contradictions (a kind of “totalitarianism of the west” held up alongside the Stalinism of the east). Many of the key works of critical theory post-World War II addressed such issues as the triumph of instrumental rationality over Reason, the emergence of a “culture industry” that offered a vulgar alternative to higher artistic and cultural pursuits, and the emergence of technological and administrative innovations that dehumanized and disenfranchised large segments of western society.[[11]](#footnote-11) Many of these studies offered bleak assessments of the quality of human life in these so-called techno-rational societies while providing few blueprints or strategies for making some sort of substantive change. This is where the situationists stepped in and made their mark—they sought to confront the prospect of this dreary consumerist existence by offering (in both their writing and in how they lived their lives) an alternative reality that would emphasize play, creativity, spontaneity, and autonomy from these formations of power that were, in the final analysis, of the same totalitarian genus as what was on display in the Soviet Union.

To wage this kind of psychic warfare, the situationists deployed a handful of concepts around which their nascent movement was built. The feeling of despair and separation from the lived environment they labeled alienation. This concept was first expressed by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1848:*

This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces — labor’s product —

confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of

labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the

objectification of labor. Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these

economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers;

objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as

alienation.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In short, workers work and toil to produce a surplus of economic goods and services that they are unable to enjoy the benefit of and receive disproportionate compensation for producing. The worker in the car factory builds luxury automobiles that he or she cannot afford with the wages they are paid while the nanny provides care and attention to the child that is not her own. The sum total of these alienated products and services is a world that is highly developed and advanced but is nevertheless unfamiliar to those who were most responsible for is construction and maintenance. For Marx, this alienation triggers the beginning of a worker consciousness that will eventually provide the foundation for a collective worker-based resistance to the forces of labor exploitation and the eventual the overthrow of capitalism. But what Guy Debord and other situationists argued instead was that this alienated world the workers had produced had become by the time of the mid-twentieth century so automatic in its self-reproduction that the workers not only experienced alienation in their labor but also their consumption. The active workers of Marx who have the potential of radically transforming society for their own benefit become for situationists like Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem passive consumers haunted by a “mediocrity of existence” where all opportunity for agency and personal autonomy are lost.

The context in which this alienation was experienced was the notion of the “spectacle”—arguably the most important concept devised by the situationists’ unofficial leader Guy Debord. A clear and specific definition of the spectacle is notoriously difficult to pin down, however, throughout the first chapter of Debord’s key work,*The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord tries to flesh-out a little bit the idea of the spectacle and how best one might try to understand the concept. Thesis 6 perhaps comes the most reasonably close to giving a full and formal definition:

Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something *added* to the real world—not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, 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 mode of social life.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Twenty-three years later, in a follow-up collection of thoughts and ideas published under the title of *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord gives perhaps his most rigorous definition of the spectacle—one that he seems to regret moments before he gives it—when he describes the spectacle as “the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign.”[[14]](#footnote-14) What both these characterizations of the spectacle point toward is a concept where an assemblage of power consisting of both economic and political forces merges together through ever more potent media platforms to create both a materialistic and mental apparatus of rule.

At the heart of this apparatus of rule is the power of the image. With the emergence of film as a mass medium in the early twentieth-century, and then drastically expanded with the advent of television broadcasting after World War II, the ability of images to alter or restructure the nature of human relationships (including relationships of power and authority) became readily apparent. For Debord living in France in the middle of the twentieth century, this meant giving a boost to the dominant structures and legitimizing ideologies associated with western capitalism. In These 17 of *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord states:

An earlier stage in the economy’s domination of social life entailed an obvious downgrading

of *being* into *having* that left its stamp on all human endeavor. The present stage, in which

social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a

generalized shift from *having* to appearing: all effective “having” must now derive both its

immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d’etre* from appearances.[[15]](#footnote-15)

According to Debord, the emergence of industrial capitalism gave rise to a new set of social values that prioritized the production, accumulation and consumption of manufactured goods and services over all other possible human activities. With the emergence of mass media and the hegemony of the images that it brings, simple mass production gives way to such practices of advertising, marketing, branding, and public relations that transform these simple manufactured objects into deities that occupy the exalted spaces in society. Individual human beings thus construct their own identities and core value systems in relation to the mystique that surrounds these manufactured objects.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Experiencing this feeling of alienation due to being trapped in the society of the spectacle, the situationists began looking for means of escape. The first step was to study their surroundings. They were keenly aware of the existence of a relationship that took place between humans and their environment that had an impact on the mental and social well-being of individuals and the communities in which they lived. Two key concepts demonstrate their thinking on this topic. The first was psychogeogrpahy, defined as “the study of the precise laws and special effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The city of Paris—the home base for Debord and other leaders of the situationists—provided amble case studies of psychogeography; from the broad boulevards built to facilitate rapid movement of police and military units to quell public disorder to the constriction of *banlieus* connected by multilane highways offering the false promise of suburban bliss.[[18]](#footnote-18) The second concept was unitary urbanism--a way of thinking about asserting agency and implementing change in the psychogeographical environment. As expressed in the *Alba Platform*, a document from a time when the Situationist International was still in its embryonic phase, unitary urbanism is an “integral construction of the environment…that must utilize all the arts and modern techniques” in pursuit of a “greater genuine freedom and a greater domination of nature.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Via various subversive activities like dérive and détournement, “the environment is explored and challenged, using various strategies and techniques in order to highlight the spectacle’s dominance and to provide alternative ways of using and living in the environment.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Being creatures of the city, however, meant that their understanding of the environment was more or less confined to the urban environment of the European metropolis and that any greater understanding of the environment in terms of ecology or the biosphere was scarce. There was a recognition of a “monopoly of a single untheorized perspective” of “the present power structure’s blind (devotion) to economic growth,” but this idea was deployed to explain the alienation of working and middle class existence in the milieu of consumer capitalism rather than a hazard to the natural environment.[[21]](#footnote-21) Ides about human alienation vis-à-vis the alienation from such things as clean air, water and other basic necessities, especially on a more macro scale beyond a single city or neighborhood, were difficult to find, and when such ideas were raised in their presence, their reception was usually very apathetic. Nothing epitomizes this more than the response the American radical Murray Bookchin received when he traveled to Paris in the hopes of establishing contacts with and pulling key situationist personalities into his counterculture movement in the United States. Upon arriving in Paris and gaining an audience with Guy Debord and a handful of other leading lights of Paris situationists, his suggestions about raising worldwide awareness about the fate of the planet’s ecology earned him a frigid response. Janet Biehl describes the encounter as follows:

Finally, he (Bookchin) told them about the sleeper issue, ecology—people weren’t yet complaining much about deforestation, or air and water pollution, or chemicals in agriculture, or the destruction of topsoil, but they would, sooner or later. But that only led to more derision—the Siutationists mocked Bookchin as “Smokey the Bear.” He (Bookchin) concluded with a shrug that they were not serious politically—they were basically “literary.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Bookchin’s experience reflects the absence of direct references to ecological concerns or environmental activism in the literary output of the situationists for most of their heyday leading up to the Paris Spring in 1968.

***A Sick Planet***

In May of 1968, the boulevards of Paris normally filled with traffic and tourists gave way to thousands of groups marching through the city while other assemblies of students and workers occupied or blockaded key buildings and public squares. For the situationists—and more especially for Guy Debord himself, “it was to be the moment when the revolution he had predicted for so long was at hand.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Unfortunately for Debord and his radical cohorts, the revolution fizzled out as improvised student run communes in university buildings fell into disrepair and mismanagement while the heavily armed anti-riot forces of the state ruthlessly stomped out any lingering pockets of agitation. Though some situationists like Debord briefly found new life in relocating some of their activities to Italy, the core group in France began to atrophy.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Desperate to maintain relevancy, SI member Paolo Salvadori in 1970 composed a new vision for the Situationist International, including a call to end petty disputes over the minutiae of situationist thought and focus on disseminating the core ideas of their movement and its values to the wider community. He dubbed this new vision the “Provisional Theses for the Discussion of New Theoretico-Practical Orientations in the SI,” and called for the analysis of society to incorporate, among other things, “urbanism as the destruction of the city; automation seen as automatically liberating; ecology as present-day society’s moral crisis, which compels it to envisage the necessity of *itself* transforming production relations; and, linked to all the above, “situationism;” the critique of everyday life conducted by power itself.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Aside from a willingness to use the term “situationism”[[26]](#footnote-26) in a formal communique, the passage also demonstrates recognition of the issues of the natural environment and a need to incorporate ecological concerns into the larger situationist critique of consumer society. The situationists, it seemed, were now willing to “go green.”

Guy Debord seemed to be on board with this shift in strategy and focus. In 1971, he began writing a short article call “A Sick Planet” that would discuss how the spectacle distorted the understanding of pollution and the threat to human civilization posed by environmental degradation. This article would be featured in *L’Internationale Situationniste*, the unofficial mouthpiece publication of the French situationist movement along with a handful of other pieces that were to clear the path forward for a movement that was rapidly coming apart. Unfortunately, the issue would never be published. The previous year had seen Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord have a bitter falling out before Vaneigem left the group in Novemeber of 1970. Shortly thereafter, the French police began to heavily scrutinize the group, including arresting Gianfranco Sanguinetti and accusing him of being an accessory to a terrorist attack back in his native Italy in December of 1970.[[27]](#footnote-27) Amid this turmoil and eventual disintegration of the group, the issue of *L’Internationale Situationniste* that was to include “A Sick Planet” was postponed indefinitely. The essay itself was set aside and forgotten. Debord committed suicide in 1994 without ever having revised or published the essay. It was only in 2004 when Debord’s widow Alice Debord released the essay for publication as part of a slim volume of collected posthumous works that the rest of the world learned of its existence. The essay remains the most explicit statement given by any of the situationist thinkers on the topic of environmental protection.

Though very short, the essay is densely packed with arguments and observations that were far ahead of their time, including the now familiar critique that despite all the earnest declarations of “environmental consciousness” and the good-natured imperative of “going green,” the complete destruction of the biosphere is a looming reality. This paradox is at the heart of the original argument of *The Society of Spectacle*, which is at its essence the fusion of opposites, or, as Debord writes, “The spectacle cannot be abstractly contrasted to concrete social activity…(e)ach of these seemingly fixed objects has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality merges with the spectacle and the spectacle is real.”[[28]](#footnote-28) In a similar manner, Debord begins *A Sick Planet* by saying: “Two antagonistic tendencies, progression towards the highest form of commodity production and the project of its total negation, equally rich in contradictions within themselves, grow ever stronger in parallel with each other.”[[29]](#footnote-29) What makes this antagonism different, however, is that capitalism does not have the ability to overcome it—it is “the moment when it becomes impossible for capitalism to carry on working.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

For those well-versed in radical literature, the idea of capitalism facing its “final crisis” is a familiar trope. The skeptic is justified in asking what makes this contradiction of capitalism so much different than those that came before. Indeed, so much radical left thought of the past decades has pondered the question of capitalism’s swan song since Lenin wrote about imperialism being the highest (and therefore ultimate) stage of capitalism as the guns of the First World War appeared to bear out his analysis. Yet it is no secret that capitalism has been far more resilient than its frustrated critics have suggested. Each crisis that seems to be sounding the death knell is but a metamorphosis into a leaner and more totalizing phenomenon. The post Great War malaise give way to the first great waves of financialization and the Roaring Twenties while the Great Depression and World War II give way to the age of consumerism. The Great Recession of 2008, with the largest publicly funded bailouts in human history of private banks, saw only a brief spate of social unrest (in the form of the *indignado* movements in Europe and Occupy Wall Street in the US). Socialist politics in the US remains almost invisible while far right politics—a politics that does not threaten capitalism or seek to cure its effects—enjoy a renaissance. There does not seem to be any crisis that capitalism cannot overcome.

But in *A Sick Planet,* Debord argues that the environment is the one obstacle that capitalism might not be able to clear. “This society,” Debord writes, “is ruled by an overdeveloped economy which turns everything—even spring water and city air—into *economic goods*, which is to say that everything has become *economic ill*—that ‘complete denial of man’ which has now reached its perfect *material conclusion*.”[[31]](#footnote-31) In creating consumer products out of such fundamental natural goods like clean water and breathable air, the capitalist world order is conceding that these goods *are no longer consumable in their natural state*. Resources that were once abundant and available to the commons are quickly becoming poisoned, and where this contamination has yet to take hold, private interests have enclosed these valuable resources and are parceling them out for their own enrichment. The problem of *why* the resources became tainted in the first place or what measures can be taken to reverse the damage remain outside the realm of accepted discourse. No matter how environmentally consciously these dwindling resources are extracted and marketed, the result is still greater destruction of the biosphere, until “what is now produced, directly, is *death*.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

In such a situation, the normal remedy is for the state to intervene to protect the dwindling resources and regulate industrial and consumer activity so as to preserve the functionality of the biosphere, conserve finite resources and reverse the environmental damage that has already taken place. Yet, as Debord argues, the society of the spectacle does not allow the state to realize any of these goals despite the honest intentions of those who may occupy its positions of power. Indeed, within Debord’s comments about the state’s inability to address the challenge of environmental degradation is a caustic and scathing criticism of western democracy *in toto*, “The supposedly democratic management of capital,” Debord writes, “offers nothing except the electoral victories and defeats that—as has always been obvious—have never changed anything in general and precious little in particular with regard to a class society which imagines that it can last forever.”[[33]](#footnote-33) When the stakes are as high and the crisis at its most profound, electoral politics and representative democracy, with its focus on making piecemeal reform and minor tweaks to the prevailing assemblage of power, cannot be expected to rise to the increasingly desperate circumstances. This is not because, one should note, an authoritarian solution is needed, but rather that parliamentary forms of democracy are themselves too oppressive and constraining.[[34]](#footnote-34) As Debord writes:

Every representative system is essentially *conservative*, whereas the conditions of capitalist

society have never been susceptible of conservation. They are continually, and ever more

rapidly, undergoing modification, but decisions in this regard—which always ultimately favor

giving the market economy its head—are left entirely to politicians who are no more than

publicists, whether they run around uncontested or against others who are going to do just

the same thing—and say so loudly.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Nor is more scientific research or technocratic expertise a solution either. Scientific rationality—that great driver of technical innovation and industrial development—has the ability to detect and measure the nature of the problem, as evidenced by an abundance of academic research, technical studies, panel reports and government hearings. Nevertheless, a genuine solution to the problem seems far from being offered. The closest the world seems to have come to such a development has been the Paris Climate Accord—an agreement that most observers agree is inadequate in the demands it makes on its signatories and greatest benefit is that it allowed the nations of the world to appear that they were doing *something* to address the problem. But in the spectacle, as Debord would argue, all one can truly hope for is the appearance of progress toward a solution rather than the solution itself. And with the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House, even this shallow pageant has given way to an overt hostility to the Paris Accord’s watered down measures. Trump epitomizes the spectacle so well that he can claim to have actually improved the environment while simultaneously lambast not only the Paris agreement, but all efforts by the international community to address climate change going back to the Rio Summit of 1992.[[36]](#footnote-36)

***The Spectacle of Environmentalism in the* Gilets Jaunes *Movement***

Recent events in France have brought some of the phenomena Debord describes in *A Sick Planet* into focus. When Emmanuel Macron won the French presidency in 2017, one of his key policy positons was to “make the planet great again,” by supporting and promoting the Paris COP21 international climate agreement and pledging 30 million Euro for climate research.[[37]](#footnote-37) Macron also benefited from a wave of frustration with traditional parties in France and a promise that he would be a refreshing change to the status quo of the traditional French political parties. Speaking in New York at the Summit on the Global Pact for the Environment, Macron stated, “We must follow our consciences and radically overhaul the paradigms of our shared lives on this planet, and to this end we must forge ideas, notions and rules enabling us to lay the foundations of this new commitment.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Yet when Macron entered office, he immediately instituted a series of “rationalizations” of French labor, pension and tax policies that most disproportionately impacted the middle and working classes of France. Of particular toxicity were a fuel tax and a stricter emission standard on cars that bit especially hard on French residents of rural communities who had access to no alternative transportation options other than driving.[[39]](#footnote-39) By placing taxes and other additional costs on those least able to pay for the cost of environmental protection while not making any significant moves to curb consumer excess at the top levels of society, Macron made the same types of “piecemeal reforms” that disgusted Debord and demonstrated his contention that electoral politics and parliamentary democracy cannot be expected to solve any real crisis. In the face of this paralysis, many French citizens have rejected the campaign promises of Macron and other politicians that are never kept and the hypocrisy of metropolitan bureaucrats who preach the need to be environmentally conscious while they continue to enjoy the fruits of the consumer lifestyle. As angry protestors put in a newspaper interview, “When planes fly low overhead, we think: Look, there are the Parisians who can afford a holiday. Dropping their pollution on us too”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Since November of 2018, most major cities in France have seen large and often violent protests take place on a weekly basis. The participants in these demonstrations have dubbed themselves the *gilets jaunes* after the yellow high visibility safety bibs they wear at each event. Emmanuel Macron’s reforms have been the focus of the anger of the *gilets jaunes* and have embodied the false hope of parliamentary democracy to be the deliverer of real solutions to the threat of environmental destruction. In December of 2018, Édouard Phillipe, the French Prime Minister, “invited eight representatives of the *gilets jaunes* to meet with him at Matignon, his official residence…. (O)nly two of them showed up. One left immediately, because Philippe refused to broadcast the meeting on live television. The one who stayed demanded anonymity.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The lack of enthusiasm among the protestors reflects recognition that any meeting with the government will be an exercise in futility. Or, as Debord says in *A Sick Planet*, “In its state-run and regulated form, the ‘fight against pollution’ is bound, at first, to mean no more than a few specializations, ministries and jobs for the boys and promotions within the bureaucracy…It will never amount to a real change until the present system of production is transformed root and branch.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

This is why the measures that Macron has introduced to quell the protests and placate the moderates in the ranks of the *gilets jaunes* have failed. There is a recognition that the malaise that so many feel among the middle and working classes cannot be solved through the traditional political mechanisms, which tend to be designed not to necessarily solve the problems but to preserve the status quo in the face of these problems. What Debord is arguing in *A Sick Planet* is that the threat of environmental calamity is beyond the ability of technocratic governments to solve, and the demand made by the *gilets jaunes* for Macron to step down represents a similar recognition.

Unfortunately for the *gilets jaunes,* their movement is subject to a similar fate. The real insidiousness of the spectacle, according to Debord, is not just rendering politics into pantomime, but also the possibility of meaningful revolt. As Debord says in thesis 122 of *Society of the Spectacle:*

As capitalism’s ever-intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own impoverishment, putting them in the position of having to reject that impoverishment *in its totality or not at all*, revolutionary organization has had to learn *it can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated form of struggle*.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The protestors who pour into the streets of France provide the world powerful images of popular revolts and populist action, but it turns out this is exactly how the spectacle operates, using the images of people in the streets to draw in more spectators and bystanders eager to watch the drama unfold. The antagonists are as paralyzed in terms of offering substantive solutions to the problem (or initiating the kind of political change that would put a regime in place to actually address the problem) as the organs of the government. Indeed many of the *jilets gaunes* are quite fond of Marine Le Pen’s Front National and are skeptical of the urgency surrounding the discussions of climate change and other looming environmental threats.[[44]](#footnote-44) Here the society of the spectacle gets its last laugh, as those whose way of life is must vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, from farmers in the interior of the country to those who work in the tourism industries in the mountains and beaches, are themselves unable to make any substantive alternative proposals to the remedies promulgated by the government. In the wake of this collective paralysis, it is the populists and reactionaries that make the greatest gains in society.

***Ecocide or Revolution***

At the heart of situationist theory is the insight that contemporary society provides an impressive amount of material abundance but at the cost of limited real choices about the direction of one’s life and a deep sense of alienation.[[45]](#footnote-45) The despair induced by this alienation “appears like lightning, which we know only when it strikes.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Debord cites one example of this in the following anecdote:

Recently in France, a certain Bernard Durin killed himself—apparently without reason. He

was thirty-seven years old and had been a model employee for the last fifteen of them.

Everyone who knew agreed that “he had everything one needs to be happy.” He had a ten-

year old daughter, Agnes, who got on well in school. A charming wife. A good job at IBM. A

salary of F2,500 as month. An attractively furnished modern apartment. A (Peugeot) 404. A

television, a washing machine and even an aquarium...That was his life: electronics,

skyscraper housing estates, cars, refrigerators and televisions. It was also his death.[[47]](#footnote-47)

While advanced consumer capitalism had rescued the western world from a life of depravation in terms of food, clothing and shelter, the comforts and abundance that it provided were not making its residents happy. Slowly over time, from the end of World War II to the present, those areas of the world that have enjoyed the fruits of consumerism to their fullest extent are paralyzed by a larger existential crisis they seem unable to navigate. Indeed, the actions of Bernard Durin seem tame when comparted with the kind of mass killings events seen in the United States today. Though a clear cause/effect relationship is more difficult to discern, the malaise that motivated the original situationist thinkers to begin theorizing about the sinister and desultory effects of consumer society is even more observable in the contemporary context. The key question that Raoul Vaneigem asks back in 1962—suicide or revolution?—is even more pressing in the hyperreal twenty-first century, where data showing the rise in suicides, alcoholism and drug addiction are on the increase in many parts of the United States.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Except now the problem no longer lies with an aggregate of individuals whose dejection is limited to a certain extent to their own atomized existences and a narrow circle of intimate friends and family. The environmental destruction being wrought by the current consumer stage of capitalism is impacting everyone on earth in a negative way—even those who do not or have yet to experience the ennui that the situationists link with the triumph of the society of the spectacle. Debord himself underwent a profound transformation in this regard, when he dismissed the entreaties of Murray Bookchin to include environmental concerns in his Paris Spring insurgency in 1968 to a few years later writing *A Sick Planet*—the situationists’ only substantive work on the topic of ecological preservation. Debord concluded that tract back in 1971, by writing, “the slogan ‘Revolution or Death!’ is no longer the lyrical expression of consciousness in revolt: rather, it is the *last word of scientific thought of our century*.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

What he was arguing for in that work remained true to the roots of the situationist philosophy as a whole—namely the need to actively engage in the wholesale transformation of consumer capitalist society into something less boring, less alienating and less depressing. But *A Sick Planet* included the recognition that the empty life of consumerism that was driving large groups of people in the advanced capitalist world mad was also destroying the biosphere, and only an immediate and substantial remaking of the political and social order could (and can) save humanity. In this context, the question that Raoul Vaneigem asked must be reworded for the current age when the effects of climate change are starting to have their deadly impact—ecocide or revolution?

1. Monmouth University Poll, *National: Climate Concerns Increase; Most Republicans Now Acknowledge Change* (West Long Branch, New Jersey: Monmouth University, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Bowden, “Ocasio-Cortez, Markey to unveil Green New Deal legislation,” *The Hill*, January 30, 2019. Available at: https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/427783-ocasio-cortez-markey-to-unveil-green-new-deal-legislation-next-week [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Joanna Diane Caytas, “The COP21 Negotiations: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back,” *Consilience*

   No. 19 (2018), pp. 1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. IPCC, *Global warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* V. Masson-Delmotte, P. Zhai, H. O. Pörtner, et al., eds. (Geneva, Switzerland: World Meteorological Organization, 2018). Available at: https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Guy Debord very explicitly wished to avoid terms like “situationism” because, as he put it, “such a term would mean a doctrine for interpreting existing conditions.” Since Debord was interested in problematizing and upending “existing conditions,” making reference to some sort of established doctrine of thought or philosophy would be anathema. Debord did frequently use the adjective “situationist” to refer to those who participated in the subversive practices he wrote about or to describe attitudes and dispositions that had an orientation toward disrupting the status quo, and following Debord’s lead, this paper will do the same. See “Definitions” in Ken Knabb (ed.) *Situationist International: An Anthology* (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is a slight alteration (a detournement, if you will!) of the phrase “suicide or revolution” written by the situationist Raoul Vaneigem in 1962. Vaneigem was referring to the increasing despair he saw taking hold among the working classes of Europe as they became increasingly alienated from their true wants and desires in pursuit of consumer comforts. No amount of material comforts or bourgeois wealth could overcome this ennui—only a revolution of the prevailing capitalist society could return meaning to the lives of everyday people. See Raoul Vaneigem, “Basic Banalities,” in Knabb, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street* (London, Vero: 2011), 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Ideologies, Classes, and the Domination of Nature,” in Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *The Society of the Spectacle,* Ken Knabb trans. (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 102-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See for example Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason*, (New York: Continuum, 1974), Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1969), and Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” in Jon Elster, ed., *Karl Marx: A Reader* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1998), 2. With regards to Debord’s regret about his writing with a clarity not normally associated with him, he states in the line preceding the one quoted above, “However, in this brief work there will be only too many things which are, alas, easy to understand.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 16. Italics in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 43-44. In this way, Debord is building off of Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism, but at a level far greater than was ever likely conceived by Marx. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography” in Knabb, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This focus on urban development has been one of the lasting contributions of situationist ideals. See Tom McDonough, ed., *The Situationists and the City* (London: Verso, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The document was put forth by the Lettrist International, a literary organized that morphed into the Situationist International after the Alba Platform was issued. See Knabb, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Adam Barnard, “The legacy of the Situationist International: The production of situations of creative resistance.” *Capital and Class* vol. 28, 3: 108. The term dérive was defined by the situationists as “a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences.” The idea behind the dérive was to experience a city in terms of the individual rather than in the terms of the ruling assemblages of power and their vulgar priorities of traffic circulation, tourism attractions and shopping. Détournement was “the integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a mileau. In this sense, there (is) no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means.” Stated another way, détournement was taking existing text and images from various media and “processing” them in a way that the original message of the media gives way to a new and often contradictory message. As a filmmaker, Debord was made great use of existing material in popular cinema or television commercials to splice together a completely new work that would critique the values of popular entertainment and advertising. See Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Janet Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 252-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Paolo Salvadori, in Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Note 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Hussey, 263-265. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Guy Debord in Knabb, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Guy Debord, *A Sick Planet, 77.* [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 84. Italics in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Debord was keenly aware that the alternatives to capitalism during the Cold War in the form of the “socialist” eastern bloc countries were equally problematic in terms of addressing the question of environmental destruction. Debord writes: A country such as China, if it is to retain respect and power among impoverished nations, has no choice but to sacrifice a disproportionate part of its slim budget to the generation of a decent quantity of pollution, as for example, to the (re)discovery or touching up of the technology of thermonuclear war (or, more precisely, of the terrifying spectacle of thermonuclear war). Such a high quotient of poverty, both material and mental, buttressed by so much terror, amounts to a death warrant for the bureaucracies presently in power. See Ibid., 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Timothy Cama, “Trump EPA touts air quality improvements,” *The Hill*. July 31, 2018. Available at: <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/399753-trump-epa-touts-air-quality-improvements>. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Melanie Hall, “Emmanuel Macron, Europe’s Climate Hero?” *Deutsche Welle*, July 21, 2017. Available at: https://www.dw.com/en/emmanuel-macron-europes-climate-hero/a-39335145 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Emmanuel Macron*, Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic: Summit on the Global Pact for the Environment* (New York, 19 September 2017). Available at: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/united-nations/events/united-nations-general-assembly-sessions/unga-s-72nd-session/article/speech-by-m-emmanuel-macron-president-of-the-republic-summit-on-the-global-pact. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. For a larger analysis of the problematic reforms, see Serge Halami, “Forgotten France Rises Up,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 2019. Available at: https://mondediplo.com/2019/01/01gilets-jaunes-rise. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Marie-Amélie Lombard-Latune and Christine Ducros, ‘Derrière les “gilets jaunes,” (Behind the yellow vests), *Le Figaro*, Paris, 26 November 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Lauren Collins, “The Gilets Jaunes and the Surprise Crisis in France,” *The New* Yorker, December 4, 2018. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-gilets-jaunes-and-a-surprise-crisis-in-france [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Debord, *A Sick Planet*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle,* 64. Italics in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Nora Bensaâdoune, “If you want to understand the gilets jaunes, get out of Paris,” *The Guardian*, December 12, 2018. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/12/gilets-jaunes-paris-protesters-france [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Hussey, *The Game of War*, 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Guy Debord, *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1998), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Guy Debord, “The Décor and the Spectators of Suicide,” in Christopher Gray, ed. *Leaving the 20th Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International* (Bread and Circuses, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “Rising midlife morbidity and mortality, US whites,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* December 2015, 112 (49) 15078-15083. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Debord, *A Sick Planet*, 93. Italics in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)