What Occupy Wall Street Can Learn From the Situationists (A Cautionary Tale)

by Ben Davis
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Let me say at the outset that I do not believe that the 50-year-old cultural movement known as Situationism has much of an influence on the vibrant protests that started on Wall Street last month and are now spreading like prairie fire around the world.

However, the magazine Adbusters, which coined the "OccupyWallStreet" meme, does claim to be influenced by Situationism, and, because of an article I wrote about Adbusters, a radio producer recently wanted me to talk about the resonances. Meanwhile there are some who have been claiming Situationism as a model of social engagement for the present, as "Hacker Manifesto" author McKenzie Wark did in his recent (insanely romaticizing, zanily abstract) "The Beach Beneath the Street." Thinking about this subject, I realized that Situationism does have some lessons for the present. But they are mainly negative ones, because, as a political project, Situationism was a dud.

The Situationist International owes its radical cachet to its association with the events of May 1968 in Paris. It formed in 1957 as a coterie of bohemians around hard-drinking intellectual Guy Debord, emerging from the earlier Letterist International, a group that wanted to realize the potential of avant-garde poetry by creating whole new languages. Situationist theory is now probably most associated with Debord's 1967 book "The Society of the Spectacle," a set of dour anti-capitalist theses proposing that every aspect of life had become alienated. However, it was very much an art movement at the beginning — or an anti-art movement, to be precise. Its central theoretical innovation was to hypothesize that previous anti-art movements like Dada and Surrealism had failed because isolated artistic gestures, no matter how shocking, could always be recuperated by the establishment. Consequently, so the theory went, a truly radical art had to go hand-in-hand with a radical transformation of society.

What this might mean was confusing even to adherents, and Debord once stormed out of a presentation at the London ICA when someone asked for a definition of "Situationism." In practice, the Situationists functioned as a kind of demented European twin to the concurrent Pop art movement, creating works that hijacked popular culture, a practice they called "détournement." Mainly, the Situationists organized small conferences and issued scurrilous essays in their avant-garde journal.

A consequence of the Situationists' particular take on anti-art was that they were bound to purge or alienate any artists in their ranks as soon as they became successful, since success, by definition, meant that onetime confederates had been incorporated into the "spectacle." A few short years into the movement's life, a group of Scandanavian members broke away to form a more aesthetically focused Second Situationist International, which would essentially focus on radical street-theater stunts like occupying the Venice Biennale. Debord's original Situationist International, for its part, grew to conceive of itself more and more as a purely political avant garde — though as late as 1967, the group was still proposing detourned romance comics and experimental films as its main modes of activism.

However, in the meantime, the SI's high-flung, extravagantly negative rhetoric had found some audience among students. Situationist ideas influenced the Enragés, an amorphous collection of radicals who were involved in protests at a campus in

Nanterre, outside Paris, where the fuse of May '68 was lit. These demonstrations, touched off by student anger over degrading conditions and the authoritarian official culture of de Gaulle's France, would become a vent for widespread alienation from society and pent-up rage in general. For several weeks, rioting students and striking workers would bring the political structure of a major Western power to its knees.

Situationism was associated with these events via its influence on students — during the occupation of the Sorbonne, the Situationists formed a breakaway 'alternative' occupation committee of about 40 people (which had little influence on events) — but also through their celebrated graffiti slogans: "Boredom Is Counterrevolutionary," "Beneath the Paving Stones, the Beach," etc. They were a political novelty, and consequently the media fixated on them, giving them plenty of publicity. Yet just a few years later, Debord would dissolve an organization that had shrunk to nothing. What happened?

In 1963, the Situationist International explained its program: "The SI can only be a Conspiracy of Equals, a general staff that does not want troops... We will only organize the detonation: the free explosion must escape us and any other control forever." Perhaps this notion of disavowing all claims on leadership sounds progressive — but in fact it reflected the position of the armchair revolutionist, lacking commitment to thinking through the demands of organizing to make ideas reality. By the SI's own retrospective account of May '68, when the longed-for "detonation" occurred, the students influenced by Situationism were so out-there that they were quickly marginalized by the better-organized, larger 22 March Movement, formed of various groups that agreed to put aside intellectual differences in the name of united action against the authorities.

During the May crisis, the Situationists would propagandize for "workers' councils" and endlessly condemn rivals they saw as selling out or demobilizing striking workers. But they had done nothing to challenge these rivals by building credibility for their own ideas beyond a small circle of intellectuals. In fact, Debord's dandyish graffiti slogan "Never Work!" was practically designed to ensure that Situationism would not be taken seriously by workers.

In the early days of the Sorbonne protests, members of the SI distributed their pamphlet "Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organizations," which declared that the only worthy organization "refuses to reproduce within itself any of the

hierarchical conditions of the dominant world" — the type of anarchist-y rhetoric that will be familiar to activists in various leaderless movements today. Practically, however, there was always what art historian Simon Ford calls a "lack of fit" between Situationism's "anti-hierarchical organizational programme (described as a 'Conspiracy of Equals') and its actual organizational self-limitation (i.e. it was exclusive and hierarchical and dominated by one man, Debord.)"

In fact, these two aspects are halves of a whole: since initiative and expediency are required for any serious action, to disavow all hierarchy or leadership simply means that the people who *do* lead are unchecked by any acknowledged structure, while the rest are not truly accountable for the projects that the leadership initiates. It was, in fact, over just such issues that the SI was disbanded in 1972, with Debord bitterly attacking his minuscule remaining membership for their lack of initiative in helping to edit the Situationist journal. Yet he preserved the rhetoric of the SI's supposed ideal leaderlessness to the end, snarling in his final communique, "either we are fundamentally equal (and prove it) or we are *not even comparable*" [italics his]. (Published the same year, Jo Freeman's classic essay "The Tyranny of Structurelessnes," about the "leaderless, structureless" formations of the '60s women's movement, reads like an accidental point-by-point account of all the organizational woes that led to Situationism's self-inflicted defeats.)

In its entire 11-year history, the SI never included more than 70 members, and never had more than a handful at a time. Without a doubt, there are more people at this hour actively involved in organizing Occupy Wall Street than were ever directly touched by Situationism. OWS is a much more hopeful, inclusive phenomenon. But what Situationism's history shows are the limits of certain strategies — a commitment to a purely propagandistic politics, avowed leaderlessness — that still have currency because movements like Situationism are blindly glamorized by professors and cultural types. Offering the Situationist playbook as an alternative guide for political engagement today would be like offering alcohol as an alternative for mother's milk.

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