Henri Lefebvre on the Situationist International

Interview conducted and translated 1983 by Kristin Ross

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H.L.: Are you going to ask me questions about the Situationists? Because I have something I’d like to talk about.


H.L.: The Situationists . . . it’s a delicate subject, one I care deeply about. It touches me in some ways very intimately because I knew them very well. I was close friends with them. The friendship lasted from 1957 to 1961 or ‘62, which is to say about five years. And then we had a quarrel that got worse and worse in conditions I don’t understand too well myself, but which I could describe to you. In the end, it was a love story that ended badly, very badly. There are love stories that begin well and end badly. And this was one of them.

I remember a whole night spent talking at Guy Debord’s place where he was living with Michele Bernstein in a kind of studio near the place I was living on the rue Saint Martin, in a dark room, no lights at all, a veritable . . . a miserable place, but at the same time a place where there was a great deal of strength and radiance in the thinking and the research.

K.R.: They had no money?

H.L.: No.

K.R.: How did they live?

H.L.: No one could figure out how they got by. One day one of my friends (someone to whom I had introduced Debord) asked him, “What do you live on?” And Guy Debord answered very proudly, “I live off my wits.” [Laughter.] Actually, he must have had some money; I think that his family wasn’t poor. His parents lived on the Cote d’Azur. I don’t really think I really know the answer. And also Michele Bernstein had come up with a clever way to make money, or at least a bit of money. Or at least this is what she told me. She said she did horoscopes for horses, which were published in racing magazines. It was extremely funny. She determined the date of birth of the horses and did their horoscopes in order to predict the outcome of the race. And I think there were racing magazines that published them and paid her.

K.R.: So the Situationist slogan "Never work" didn’t apply to women?

H.L.: Yes, it did, because this wasn’t work. They didn’t work; they managed to live without working to quite a large extent -- of course, they had to do something. To do horoscopes for race horses, I suppose, wasn’t really work; in any case, I think it was fun to do it, and they didn’t really work.

But I’d like to go farther back in time, because everything started much earlier. It started with the COBRA group. They were the intermediaries: the group made up of architects, with the Dutch architect Constant in particular and the painter Asger Jorn and people from Brussels -- it was a Nordic group, a group with considerable ambitions. They wanted to renew art, renew the action of art on life. It was an extremely interesting and active group, which came together in the 1950s, and one of the books that inspired the founding of the group was my book Critique of Everyday Life. That’s why I got involved with them from such an early date. And the pivotal figure was Constant Nieuwenhuys, the utopian architect who designed a Utopian city, a New Babylon -- a provocative name, since in the Protestant
tradition Babylon is a figure of evil. New Babylon was to be the figure of good that took the name of the cursed city and transformed itself into the city of the future. The design for New Babylon dates from 1950. And in 1953 Constant published a text called *For an Architecture of Situation*. This was a fundamental text based on the idea that architecture would allow a transformation of daily reality. This was the conception with *Critique of Everyday Life*: to create an architecture that would itself instigate the creation of new situations. So this text was the beginning of a whole new research that developed in the following years, especially since Constant was very close to popular movements; he was one of the instigators of the Provos, the Provo movement.

K.R.: So there was a direct relationship between Constant and the Provos?

H.L.: Oh yes, he was recognized by them as their thinker, their leader, the one who wanted to transform life and the city. The relation was direct; he spurred them on.

 [...] During the postwar years, the figure of Stalin was dominant. And the Communist movement was *the* revolutionary movement. Then, after ‘56 or ‘57, revolutionary movements moved outside the organized parties, especially with Fidel Castro. In this sense, Situationism wasn’t at all isolated. Its point of origin was Holland -- Paris, too -- but Holland especially, and it was linked to many events on the world stage, especially the fact that Fidel Castro succeeded in a revolutionary victory completely outside of the Communist movement and the workers’ movement. This was an event. And I remember that in 1957 I published a kind of manifesto, *Le romantisme révolutionnaire*, which was linked to the Castro story and to all the movements happening a little bit everywhere that were outside of the parties. This was when I left the Communist Party myself. I felt that there were going to be a lot of things happening outside the established parties and organized movements like syndicates. There was going to be a spontaneity outside of organizations and institutions -- that’s what this text from 1957 was about. It was this text that put me into contact with the Situationists, because they attached a certain importance to it -- before attacking it later on. They had their critiques to make, of course; we were never completely in agreement, but the article was the basis for a certain understanding that lasted for four or five years -- we kept coming back to it.

 [...] And then there were the rather extremist movements like that of Isidore Isou and the Lettrists. They also had ambitions on an international scale. But that was all a joke. It was evident in the way that Isidore Isou would recite his Dadaist poetry made up of meaningless syllables and fragments of words. He would recite it in cafes. I remember very well having met him several times in Paris [...]

K.R.: Did the Situationist theory of constructing situations have a direct relationship with your theory of "moments"?

H.L.: Yes, that was the basis of our understanding. They more or less said to me during discussions -- discussions that lasted whole nights -- "What you call 'moments,' we call 'situations,' but we're taking it farther than you. You accept as 'moments' everything that has occurred in the course of history (love, poetry, thought). We want to create new moments."

K.R.: How did they propose to make the transition from a "moment" to a conscious construction?

H.L.: The idea of a new moment, of a new situation, was already there in Constant's text from 1953. Because the architecture of
situation is a Utopian architecture that supposes a new society, Constant’s idea was that society must be transformed not in order to continue a boring, uneventful life, but in order to create something absolutely new: situations.

K.R.: And how did the city figure into this?

H.L.: Well, "new situations" was never very clear. When we talked about it, I always gave as an example -- and they would have nothing to do with my example -- love. I said to them: in antiquity, passionate love was known, but not individual love, love for an individual. The poets of antiquity write of a kind of cosmic, physical, physiological passion. But love for an individual only appears in the Middle Ages within a mixture of Christian and Islamic traditions, especially in the south of France [...]  

K.R.: But didn’t constructing "new situations" for the Situationists involve urbanism?

H.L.: Yes. We agreed. I said to them, individual love created new situations, there was a creation of situations. But it didn’t happen in a day, it developed. Their idea (and this was also related to Constant’s experiments) was that in the city one could create new situations by, for example, linking up parts of the city, neighborhoods that were separated spatially. And that was the first meaning of the derive. It was done first in Amsterdam, using walkie-talkies. There was one group that went to one part of the city and could communicate with people in another area.

K.R.: Did the Situationists use this technique, too?

H.L.: Oh, I think so. In any case, Constant did. But there were Situationist experiments in Unitary Urbanism. Unitary urbanism consisted of making different parts of the city communicate with one another. They did have their experiments; I didn’t participate. They used all kinds of means of communication -- I don’t know when exactly they were using walkie-talkies. But I know they were used in Amsterdam and in Strasbourg.

K.R.: Did you know people in Strasbourg then?

H.L.: They were my students. But relations with them were also very strained. When I arrived in Strasbourg in 1958 or ’59, it was right in the middle of the Algerian War, and I had only been in Strasbourg for about three weeks, maybe, when a group of guys came up to me. They were the future Situationists of Strasbourg -- or maybe they were already a little bit Situationist. They said to me: "We need your support: we're going to set up a maquis in the Vosges. We're going to make a military base in the Vosges, and from there spread out over the whole country. We're going to derail trains." I replied: "But the army and the police . . . you aren't sure of having the support of the population. You're precipitating a catastrophe." So they began to insult me and call me a traitor. And, after a little while, a few weeks, they came back to see me and told me: "You were right, it's impossible. It's impossible to set up a military base in the Vosges. We're going to work on something else."

So I found myself getting along with them, and afterward they became Situationists, the same group that wanted to support the Algerians by starting up military activity in France -- it was crazy. But, you know, my relations with them were always very difficult. They got angry over nothing. I was living at the time with a young woman from Strasbourg; I was the scandal of the university. She was pregnant, she had a daughter (my daughter Armelle), and it was the town scandal -- a horror, an abomination. Strasbourg was a very bourgeois city. And the university wasn’t
outside the city, it was right in the middle. But at the same time I was giving lectures that were very successful, on music, for example -- music and society. I taught a whole course one year on "music and society"; many people attended, so I could only be attacked with difficulty. Armelle's mother, Nicole, was friends with the Situationists. She was always with them; she invited them over. They came to eat at our place, and we played music -- this was scandal in Strasbourg. So that's how I came to have close relations, organic relations, with them -- not only because I taught Marxism at the University, but through Nicole, who was an intermediary. Guy came over to my place to see Nicole, to eat dinner. But relations were difficult, they got angry over tiny things. Mustapha Khayati, author of the brochure, was in the group.

K.R.: What was the effect of the brochure [On the Poverty of Student Life]? How many copies were given out?

H.L.: Oh, it was very successful. But in the beginning, it was only distributed in Strasbourg; then, Debord and others distributed it in Paris. Thousands and thousands were given out, certainly tens of thousands of copies, to students. It's a very good brochure, without a doubt. Its author, Mustapha Khayati, was Tunisian. There were several Tunisians in the group, many foreigners who were less talked about afterward, and even Mustapha Khayati didn't show himself very often at the time because he might have had problems because of his nationality. He didn't have dual citizenship; he stayed a Tunisian and he could have had real troubles. But anyway, in Paris, after 1957, I saw a lot of them, and I was also spending time with Constant in Amsterdam. This was the moment when the Provo movement became very powerful in Amsterdam, with their idea of keeping urban life intact, preventing the city from being eviscerated by auto-routes and being opened up to automobile traffic. They wanted the city to be conserved and transformed, instead of being given over to traffic. They also wanted drugs; they seemed to count on drugs to create new situations -- imagination sparked by LSD, It was LSD in those days.

K.R.: Among the Parisian Situationists, too?

H.L.: No. Very little. They drank. At Guy Debord's place, we drank tequila with a little mezcal added. But never . . . mescaline, a little, but many of them took nothing at all. That wasn't the way they wanted to create new situations [...]
group. I could have been, but I was careful, since I knew Guy Debord’s character and his manner, and the way he had of imitating Andre Breton, by expelling everyone in order to get at a pure and hard little core. In the end, the members of the Situationist International were Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, and Michele Bernstein. There were some outer groupuscules, satellite groups -- which is where I was, and where Asger Jorn was, too. Asger Jorn had been expelled; poor Constant was expelled as well. For what reason? Well, Constant didn’t build anything -- he was an architect who didn’t build, a Utopian architect. But he was expelled because a guy who worked with him built a church in Germany; expulsion for reason of disastrous influence. It’s rubbish. It was really about keeping oneself in a pure state, like a crystal. Debord’s dogmatism was exactly like Breton’s. And, what’s more, it was a dogmatism without a dogma, since the theory of situations, of the creation of situations, disappeared very quickly, leaving behind only the critique of the existing world, which is where it all started, with the Critique of Everyday Life.

K.R.: How did your association with the Situationists change or inspire your thinking about the city? Did it change your thinking or not?

H.L.: It was all corollary, parallel. My thinking about the city had completely different sources [....] But, at the same time that I met Guy Debord [1957], I met Constant. I knew that the Provos in Amsterdam were interested in the city, and I went there to see what was going on, maybe ten times. Just to see the form that the movement was taking, if it took a political form. There were Provos elected to the city council in Amsterdam. I forget which year, but they pulled off a big victory in the municipal elections. Then, after that, it all fell apart. All this was part and parcel of the same thing. And after 1960 there was the great movement in urbanization. [The Situationists] abandoned the theory of Unitary Urbanism, since Unitary Urbanism only had a precise meaning for historic cities, like Amsterdam, that had to be renewed, transformed. But from the moment that the historic city exploded into peripherics, suburbs -- like what happened in Paris, and in all sorts of places, Los Angeles, San Francisco, wild extensions of the city -- the theory of Unitary Urbanism lost any meaning. I remember very sharp, pointed discussions with Guy Debord, where he said that urbanism was becoming an ideology. He was absolutely right, from the moment that there was an official doctrine on urbanism. I think the urbanism code dates from 1961 in France -- that’s the moment when urbanism becomes an ideology. That doesn’t mean that the problem of the city was resolved -- far from it. But at that point [the Situationists] abandoned the theory of Unitary Urbanism. And then I think that even the derive, the derive experiments were little by little abandoned around then, too. I’m not sure how that happened, because that was the moment I broke with them.

After all, there’s the political context in France, and there are also personal relations, very complicated stories. The most complicated story arose when [the Situationists] came to my place in the Pyrenees. And we took a wonderful trip: we left Paris in a car and stopped at the Lascaux caves, which were closed not long after that. We were very taken up with the problem of the Lascaux caves. They are buried very deep, with even a well that was inaccessible -- and all this was filled with paintings. How were these paintings made, who were they made for, since they weren’t painted in order to be seen? The idea was that painting started as a critique. All the more so in that all the churches in the region have crypts. We stopped at Saint-Savin, where there are frescoes on the church’s vaulted dome and a crypt full of
paintings, a crypt whose depths are
difficult to reach because it is so dark. What
are paintings that were not destined to be
seen? And how were they made? So, we
made our way south; we had a fabulous
feast at Sarlat, and I could hardly drive -- I
was the one driving. I got a ticket; we were
almost arrested because I crossed a village
going 120 kilometers per hour. They stayed
several days at my place, and, working
together, we wrote a programmatic text. At
the end of the week they spent at
Navarrenx, they kept the text. I said to
them, "You type it" (it was handwritten),
and afterward they accused me of
plagiarism. In reality, it was complete bad
faith. The text that was used in writing the
book about the [Paris] Commune was a
joint text, by them and by me, and only one
small part of the Commune book was taken
from the joint text.

I had this idea about the Commune as a
festival, and I threw it into debate, after
consulting an unpublished document about
the Commune that is at the Feltrinelli
Foundation in Milan. It’s a diary about the
Commune. The person who kept the diary -
- who was deported, by the way, and who
brought back his diary from deportation
several years later, around 1880 -- recounts
how, on March 28, 1871, Thier’s soldiers
came to look for the cannons that were in
Montmartre and on the hills of Belleville;
how the women who got up very early in
the morning heard the noise and all ran out
in the streets and surrounded the soldiers,
laughing, having fun, greeting them in a
friendly way. Then they went off to get
coffee and offered it to the soldiers, and
these soldiers, who had come to get the
cannons, were more or less carried away by
the people. First the women, then the men,
everyone came out, in an atmosphere of
popular festival. The Commune cannon
incident was not at all a situation of armed
heroes arriving and combating the soldiers
taking the cannons. It didn’t happen at all
like that. It was the poeople who came out
of their houses, who were enjoying
themselves. The weather was beautiful,
March 28 was the first day of spring, it was
sunny: the women kiss the soldiers, they’re
relaxed, and the soldiers are absorbed into
all of that, a Parisian popular festival. But
this diary is an exception. And afterward
the theorists of the heroes of the Commune
said to me, “This is a testimonial, you can’t
write history from a testimonial.” The
Situationists said more or less the same
thing. I didn’t read what they said; I did my
work. There were ideas that were batted
around in conversation, and then worked
up in common texts. And then afterward, I
wrote a study on the Commune. I worked
for weeks in Milan, at the Feltrinelli
Institute; I found unpublished
documentation. I used it, and that’s
completely my right. Listen, I don’t care at
all about these accusations [by the
Situationists] of plagiarism. And I never
took the time to read what they wrote
about it in their journal. I know that I was
dragged through the mud.

And then, as for how I broke with them, it
happened after an extremely complicated
story concerning the journal Arguments. The
idea had come up to stop editing Arguments
because several of the collaborators in the
journal, such as my friend Kostas Axelos,
thought that its role was over; they thought
they had nothing more to say. In fact, I
have the text by Axelos where he talks
about the dissolution of the group and of
the journal. They thought it was finished
and that it would be better to end it
[quickly] rather than let it drag along. I was
kept informed of these discussions. During
discussions with Guy Debord, we talked
about it and Debord said to me, “Our
journal, the Internationale Situationniste has
to replace Arguments.” And so Argument’seditor, and all the people there, had to
agree. Everything depended on a certain
man [Herval] who was very powerful at the
time in publishing: he did a literary
chronicle for L’Express, he was also in with
the Nouvelle revue francaise and the Editions de Minuit. He was extremely powerful, and everything depended on him.

Well, at that moment I had broken up with a woman, very bitterly. She left me, and she took my address book with her. This meant I no longer had Herval’s address. I telephoned Debord and told him I was perfectly willing to continue negotiations with Herval, but that I no longer had his address, his phone number, nothing. Debord began insulting me over the phone. He was furious and said, "I’m used to people like you who become traitors at the decisive moment." That’s how the rupture between us began, and it continued in a curious way.

This woman, Eveline -- who, I forgot to mention, was a longtime friend of Michele Bernstein -- had left me, and Nicole took her place, and Nicole was pregnant. She wanted the child, and so did I: it’s Armelle. But Guy Debord and our little Situationist friends sent a young woman to Navarrenx over Easter vacation to try to persuade Nicole to get an abortion.

K.R.: Why?

H.L.: Because they didn’t know, or they didn’t want to know, that Nicole wanted this child just as I did. Can you believe that this woman, whose name was Denise and who was particularly unbearable, had been sent to persuade Nicole to have an abortion and leave me, in order to be with them? Then I understood -- Nicole told me about it right away. She told me, "You know, this woman is on a mission from Guy Debord; they want me to leave you and get rid of the kid." So, since I already didn’t much like Denise, I threw her out. Denise was the girlfriend of that Situationist who had learned Chinese -- I forget his name [Rene Vienet]. I’m telling you this because it’s all very complex, everything gets mixed up; political history, ideology, women . . . but there was time when it was a real, very warm friendship.

K.R.: You even wrote an article entitled "You Will All Be Situationists."

H.L.: Oh yes, I did that to help bring about the replacement of Arguments by the Internationale Situationniste. Guy Debord accused me of having done nothing to get it published. Yes, it was Herval who was supposed to publish it. Lucky for me that it didn’t appear because afterwards they would have reproached me for it. But there’s a point I want to go back to -- the question of plagiarism. That bothered me quite a bit. Not a lot, just a little bit. We worked together day and night at Navarrenx, we went to sleep at nine in the morning (that was how they lived, going to sleep in the morning and sleeping all day). We ate nothing. It was appalling. I suffered throughout the week, not eating, just drinking. We must have drunk a hundred bottles. In a few days. Five . . . and we were working while drinking. The text was almost a doctrinal resume of everything we were thinking, about situations, about transformations of life; it wasn’t very long, just a few pages, handwritten. They took it away and typed it up, and afterwards thought they had a right to the ideas. These were ideas we tossed around on a little country walk I took them on. With a nice touch of perversity, I took them down a path that led nowhere, that got lost in the woods, fields, and so on. Michele Bernstein had a complete nervous breakdown, she didn’t enjoy it at all. It’s true, it wasn’t urban, it was very deep in the country.

K.R.: A rural derive. Let’s talk about the derive in general. Do you think it brought anything new to spatial theory or to urban theory? In the way that it emphasized experimental games and practices, do you think it was more productive than a purely theoretical approach to the city?
H.L.: Yes. As I perceived it, the derive was more of a practice than a theory. It revealed the growing fragmentation of the city. In the course of its history, the city was once a powerful organic unity; for some time, however, that unity was becoming undone, was fragmenting, and [the situationists] were recording examples of what we had all been talking about, like the place where the new Bastille Opera is going to be built. The Place de la Bastille is the end of historic Paris -- beyond that it's the Paris of the first industrialization of the nineteenth century. The Place des Vosges is still aristocratic Paris of the seventeenth century. When you get to the Bastille, another Paris begins, which is of the nineteenth century, but it's Paris of the bourgeoisie, of commercial, industrial expansion, at the same time that the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie takes hold of the Marais, the center of Paris -- it spreads out beyond the Bastille, the rue de la Roquette, the rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine, etc. So already the city is becoming fragmented. We had a vision of a city that was more and more fragmented without its organic unity being completely shattered. Afterward, of course, the peripheries and the suburbs highlighted the problem. But back then it wasn't yet obvious, and we thought that the practice of the derive revealed the idea of the fragmented city. But it was mostly done in Amsterdam. The experiment consisted of rendering different aspects or fragments of the city simultaneous, fragments that can only be seen successively, in the same way that there exist people who have never seen certain parts of the city.

K.R.: While the derive took the form of a narrative.

H.L.: That's it; one goes along in any direction and recounts what one sees.

K.R.: But the recounting can't be done simultaneously.

H.L.: Yes, it can, if you have a walkie-talkie. The goal was to attain a certain simultaneity. That was the goal; it didn't always work.

K.R.: So, a kind of synchronic history.

H.L.: Yes, that's it, a synchronic history. That was the meaning of Unitary Urbanism: unify what has a certain unity, but a lost unity, a disappearing unity.

K.R.: And it was during the time when you knew the situationists that the idea of Unitary Urbanism began to lose its force?

H.L.: At the moment when urbanization became truly massive, that is, after 1960, and when the city, Paris, completely exploded. You know that there were very few suburbs in Paris; there were some, but very few. And then suddenly the whole area was filled, covered with little houses, with new cities, Sarcelles and the rest. Sarcelles became a kind of myth. There was even a disease that people called the "sarcellite." Around then Guy Debord's attitude changed -- he went from Unitary Urbanism to the thesis of urbanistic ideology.

K.R.: And what was that transition, exactly?

H.L.: It was more than a transition, it was the abandonment of one position in order to adopt the exact opposite one. Between the idea of elaborating an urbanism and the thesis that all urbanism is an ideology is a profound modification. In fact, by saying that all urbanism was a bourgeois ideology, [the situationists] abandoned the problem of the city. They left it behind. They thought that the problem no longer interested them. While I, on the other hand, continued to be interested; I thought that the explosion of the historic city was precisely the occasion for finding a larger theory of the city, and not a pretext for abandoning the problem. But it wasn't
because of this that we fell out; we fell out for much more sordid reasons. That business about sabotaging *Arguments*, Herval’s lost address -- all that was completely ridiculous. But there were certainly deeper reasons.

The theory of situations was itself abandoned, little by little. And the journal itself became a political organ. They began to insult everyone. That was part of Debord’s attitude, or it might have been part of his difficulties -- he split up with Michele Bernstein [in 1967]. I don’t know, there were all kinds of circumstances that might have made him more polemical, more bitter, more violent. In the end, everything became oriented toward a kind of polemical violence. I think they ended up insulting just about everyone. And they also greatly exaggerated their role in May ’68, after the fact.
The analyses of Henri Lefebvre and the Situationist International clarify the social functions of monuments and relate them to historical and aesthetic values. On the one hand, by its role in transmitting collective memory, its trans-functionality and its utility, the monument is symbolically indispensable. On the other hand, it is clearly a vehicle of repressive ideology. Because of the monument’s symbolic power, it must not only be understood as a reified object, but rather as a sort of cultural repository and social vector. Do you want to read the rest of this article?