

## Guest editorial

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### Debord's world

I remember the news vividly. A thunderbolt struck. It was fall 1988 and somebody told me: “Guy Debord has published another book, a sequel to *The Society of the Spectacle*, it's just come out in France.” I was about to go to graduate school and thought Debord was already dead. I had read his cult critique years before, but had no idea this man still lived. I'd understood he had disappeared into obscurity, gone underground somewhere, vanished into a dark black hole like his hero poet Comte de Lautréamont. For a few years I didn't think anything more of *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle* (Debord, 1988; see also 1991 [1988]). I was suspicious anyway; I suspected somebody was cashing in on his legacy, publishing his private notebooks, texts never meant for public airing. I wasn't turned on. It was only after the release of an English translation a couple of years later that I realized the book was legit, and Debord was in fact alive—though not, it transpired, particularly well. By then I had witnessed two amazing events from the discomfort of my dingy room, on a portable black-and-white television, in an even dingier student house in Oxford, England. The first was the tearing down of the dreaded Berlin Wall, heralding the implosion of decades of tyranny; the other was Nelson Mandela's dramatic release from Robben prison after twenty years of incarceration.

Each signified resounding victories for freedom and human rights, and, I thought, everybody should be glad. In their wake, I had an exhilarating sense of openness about the future, about what was possible. Big changes could take place—indeed, they *had* happened. Things were really up for grabs, after all. I remember the dizzy optimism my friends and I shared at the time. We ourselves were headed somewhere better and so, apparently, was the world now. It wasn't long, alas, before our bright smiles turned into gloomy frowns. I wince when I think about it now. The first chink in our optimism was the appearance of a scurrilous book with an idiotic title: *The End of History* (1992). Someone called Francis Fukuyama wrote it, a Japanese-American conservative who had once studied Hegelian philosophy in France.

It was hard to know whether his epiphany came from the mighty German idealist or from the rabid Sex Pistols lead: “The end of history” sounded a lot like the “NO FUTURE!” refrain I had heard Johnny Rotten sing a decade prior. (At least Rotten sang with irony and a dim sense of hope.) Anybody with half a brain knew Fukuyama's teleology was really an apologia for free-market capitalism. For intellectual credibility, he loosely appropriated Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1956 [1830]). In Hegel's shadow, Fukuyama said history had given other big ideals a chance: fascism during the 1930s, communism after 1917. Both had been doomed alternatives, Fukuyama reckoned, now dispatched to the dustbin of history. Only one idea stayed intact: liberal-bourgeois market democracy. Nothing else mattered, no alternative could be brooked: history had stopped dead in its tracks. It got no better than this; here we are, forever.

Around this time, I also heard another dubious clarion call that reinforced this mentality: ‘TINA’—there is no alternative; and then, almost in the same breadth, hot on its heels, came Poppy Bush's promise of ‘A New World Order’. (These mantras would soon congeal into a headier thesis: globalization.) Once I had thought history was opening up; now, everything perplexingly began to close down. Never had bright skies been so fast occluded by storm clouds. Suddenly, under our noses and before our

very eyes, democracy was hijacked, usurped by free-market Stalinism. The ‘world market’ Karl Marx projected in the *Communist Manifesto* was about to run rampant; nobody, apparently, had the right to denounce it. Marx (1978 [1848], page 475) warned how the bourgeois state must conquer the globe, must set up no other nexus between people than “callous cash payments”. “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products”, he said, “chases the bourgeoisie over the surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” Marx even said, prophetically, that the bourgeoisie must batter down all walls; commodities and money are its heavy artillery. The bourgeoisie “compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image” (page 476). This analysis had never seemed so right, even while critics claimed Marx had never been so wrong.

There was another funny thing I couldn’t figure out: just when the Right was triumphant about its ‘metanarrative’ of the market, the Left started to proclaim its incredulity to all metanarratives, to all big stories about humanity and progress. Soon they would begin to proclaim a viewpoint called ‘postmodern’. One of its ablest commissars was an ex-1960s Parisian lefty, Jean-François Lyotard, who stressed the nonfoundational nature of truth. In our present ‘postindustrial’ society, he said, partial pragmatic truths—those refracted through the gaze of media lenses—are the best we can hope and struggle for. Truth, Lyotard (1984) said, becomes like storytelling; each tale is difficult to adjudicate, because everything has relative plausibility.

Thus I recognized the paradox: the Right had set off on its long march across the entire globe, dispatching its market missionaries, spreading TINA doctrines, cajoling here, oppressing there, using heavy artillery to smash anything in its path. Meanwhile, the Left had embarked on an intricate philosophical debate about the meaning of meaning. It was tough to know where to turn, or where to run. A lot of my progressive friends embraced Lyotard and became besotted by deconstruction and poststructuralism. A few became Jacques Derrida groupies; others used clippers to shave off their hair, transforming themselves overnight into Michel Foucault look-alikes.

Little did I know, however, that Debord was already on to this state of affairs. His *Comments* on his earlier masterpiece were tinged with pathos and underwritten by a brooding pessimism. Yet his scalpel had not blunted twenty-one years on, nor had his prose lost its clinical luster or icy precision. “I am going to outline certain *practical consequences*”, he warned (Debord, 1991 [1988], page 4, emphasis in original), “still little known, of the spectacle’s rapid expansion over the last twenty years. I have no intention of entering into polemics on any aspect of this question; these are now too easy, and too useless. Nor will I try to convince. The present comments are not concerned with moralizing. They do not propose what is desirable, or merely preferable. They simply record what is.” He expected his analysis to be welcomed by fifty or sixty people, “a large number given the times in which we live and the gravity of the matters under discussion” (page 5). Regrettably, though, there will be too many things easily understood.

To begin with, the spectacle has continued to advance rapidly since the disturbances of 1968 and their failures to overthrow existing order. We thought it was bad enough in 1967. Now, the spectacle had spread to its furthest limits on every side, while increasing its density at the center, learning new defensive strategies, as well as innovative powers of attack. Since *The Society of the Spectacle*, the society of the spectacle, with barely half a century behind it, has become ever more powerful, perfecting its media extravaganzas, raising a whole generation who know nothing else and who have been molded by its laws. Ordinarily, Debord was not somebody who corrected himself. But things have deteriorated so palpably that they have outstripped his darkest prognostications.

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History, accordingly, forced him to intervene yet again, if only to document the latest phase of the spectacle, “without doubt the most important event to have occurred this century, and the one for which the fewest explanations have been ventured” (1991 [1988], page 73). In different circumstances, he would have considered himself “altogether satisfied with my first work on this subject, and left others to consider future developments. But in the present situation, it seemed unlikely that anyone else would do it” (page 73). It is a tribute to Debord’s genius that *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* was penned *before* the Berlin Wall was ripped down, *before* ‘globalization’ was on every politicians’ lips, in every free-marketeers’ wet dream, and on every business school syllabus.

The Wall, of course, had been a de facto demarcation between two rival forms of spectacular rule. On the eastern flank was a regime akin to what Debord (1992 [1967], pages 58–59) had called the “concentrated spectacle”, with its ideology condensing around a dictatorial personality, whose mantle resulted from a “totalitarian counter-revolution”. On the western flank emerged the “diffuse spectacle” (page 60), the Americanization of the world, driven by wage earners applying ‘freedom of choice’ to purchase a dazzling array of consumer durables. The latter system used to frighten many ‘underdeveloped’ countries; yet, more and more, it successfully seduced them to jump on the bandwagon, to grab its cachet, or be damned.

With the Wall gone, the former Eastern Bloc could now be seduced, too. Henceforth two hitherto separated spectacular forms spectacularly came together into their ‘rational combination’: the *integrated spectacle* (Debord, 1991 [1988], page 9). Once, when the spectacle was concentrated, “the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part” (page 9). The integrated spectacle has now “spread itself to the point where it permeates all reality” (page 9). Nothing is untainted anymore, nothing in culture or in nature; everything has had its halo torn off, its sentimental veil peeled back; everything has been “polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry. Even genetics has become readily available to the dominant social forces” (page 10).

The integrated spectacle, Debord said (1991 [1988], pages 12–23), has sinister characteristics: incessant technological renewal; integration of the state and economy; generalized secrecy; unanswerable lies; and an eternal present. Gizmos proliferate at unprecedented speeds; commodities outdate themselves almost each week; nobody can step down the same supermarket aisle twice. The commodity is beyond criticism; useless junk nobody really needs assumes a vital life force that everybody apparently wants. The state and economy have congealed into an undistinguishable unity, managed by spin doctors, spin-doctored by managers. Everyone is at the mercy of the expert or the specialist, and the most useful expert is he who can best lie. Now, for the first time ever, “no party or fraction of a party even tries to pretend that they wish to change anything significant” (page 15).

Without any real forum for dissent, public opinion has been silenced. Masked behind game shows, reality television, and CNN, news of what is genuinely important, of what is really changing, is seldom seen or heard. “Generalized secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all it displays and, in the final analysis, as its most vital operation” (page 16). With consummate skill, the integrated spectacle “organizes ignorance of what is about to happen and, immediately afterwards, the forgetting of whatever has nonetheless been understood” (page 16). Ineptitude compels not laughter but universal respect. The present is all that matters. In fashion, in clothes, in music, everything has come to a halt: you must forget what came before, or else reinvent it as merchandise. At the same time, it is no longer acceptable to believe in the future. “The end of history”, said Debord (page 16), pre-Fukuyama, “gives

power a welcome break". The integrated spectacle covers its tracks, concealing the process of its recent conquests. "Its power already seems familiar, as if it had always been there. All usurpers have shared this aim: to make us forget that *they have only just arrived*" (page 16, emphasis in original).

Our self-proclaimed democracy also constructs its own inconceivable foe: *terrorists*. "Its wish is *to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results*" (page 24, emphasis in original). Spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, "but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable" (page 24). Every enemy of the spectacle is a terrorist enemy; all dissenters—grievances notwithstanding—are terrorists. Spectacular authorities need to infiltrate, compile dossiers, eliminate critique—authentic or not. Unexplained crimes are either suicides or terrorist attacks. Terrorists themselves soon feel the wrath of state terrorism: Mossad kills the Jihad in the Lebanon; the Contras do likewise with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua; ditto the SAS with the IRA in Northern Ireland; the GAL with ETA in Spain; and the CIA with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. In this context, mafiosi flourish: Colombian drugs Mafia, Sicilian Mafia, fundamentalist Mafia, and, of course, White House Mafia. New forms of economic integration necessitate new bonds of dependency and protection. As such, the "Mafia is not an outsider in this world", Debord said: "it is perfectly at home. Indeed, in the integrated spectacle it stands as the *model* of all advanced commercial enterprises" (page 67, original emphasis).

If this reasoning somehow tallies with your current take on the world, I would ask you to go off and read Debord's text for yourself. You can find an excellent English translation in decent bookstores near you. Recommend it to friends, argue about its contents, and don't get too depressed. It might even prompt you, as it prompted me, to write a book about the author himself (Merrifield, forthcoming), and in so doing realize that while his spirit stays alive there is always hope that these dark times might one day slip away forever.

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