



PHOTO: INTERNATIONALE SITUATIONNISTE, NO.12 (SEPTEMBER, 1969)

A photo of the Situationist International placing a copy of a statue of Charles Fourier at Place Clichy, Paris, 1969.

Placing a statue in its proper place

by Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

abstract

In 1969 the Situationist group re-installed a copy of a statue of Charles Fourier on an empty plinth at Place Clichy in Paris as a gesture of commemoration of the events in May-June 1968 in Paris. The article will discuss the event and use it in an analysis of the ongoing monument wars that took off in the summer of 2020.

KEYWORDS: Situationist International, Charles Fourier.

On March 10, 1969, members of the Situationist International lifted a 100-kilo bronze-finished plaster copy of a statue of the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier onto a 2.5-metre empty plinth in Place Clichy in Paris.¹ The Situationist International generally had little use for monuments. Especially not monuments immortalizing kings or other political or religious authorities. In line with the group's revolutionary critique of the capitalist commodity economy and the pictorial forms of domination that constituted the fragile simulacrum of a society they called "the society of the spectacle", there was nothing else to do but destroy the ruling order and its monuments.² Not only did monuments glorify an oppressive history, their presence was itself a blockage to another way of using the space of the city. Monuments were materialized ideology. Therefore they had to go. The case of the Fourier statue,

however, was different: it had to go back to its place in the center of the city in order to make possible a different use of the city.

IRETURN TO THIS heavy-handed practical joke from 1969 on the back of the huge increase in the number of protests against statues and monuments. I do so, claiming that the Situationists' small action in 1969 is instructive for those who want to reflect a little on the relationship between public monuments, art, violence and history. The toppling of statues culminated in 2020 where the protests against racist and colonial statues almost seemed to take on the character of a new iconoclastic international dedicated to a reinterpretation of history from a consistently anti-racist perspective. As Jacqueline Lalouette writes in *Les statues de la discorde*, between May 30 and October 23, 2020, more than 100 statues commemorating slave owners, settlers or fascists were toppled by protesters or removed by local authorities in the US, Great Britain, Belgium, Italy, Denmark, and other countries.³ The global spread of statue topplings was triggered by the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American who was strangled by a white policeman on May 25 in Minneapolis. Floyd was choked while repeatedly uttering "I can't breathe". The phrase immediately became an anti-racist slogan not only in the widespread demonstrations and riots that took place in the following days in the United States, but in the many demonstrations that took place around the world in the follow-

ing weeks and months, where protesters rejected racism and police brutality and demanded the decolonization of public spaces. The toppling of statues is nothing new, but the summer of 2020 marked a high point; the scale exceeded earlier iconoclastic moments in recent history, and one toppling seemed to inspire the next in a global flow of urban interventions.

Against monuments

The Situationist International was against monuments. They saw themselves as part of a marginalized and almost completely destroyed revolutionary movement that tried to criticize existing capitalist society as a global social totality. It is difficult to articulate the kind of historical self-consciousness the Situationists had: the avant-garde is not what it once was, but the Situationists' analysis of the function of monuments in the city can perhaps help us in the discussion of the ongoing statue struggles.

The Situationists were a collective of anti-capitalist practitioners active from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, who sought to develop a practical critique of the alienated nature of late capitalist society and its revolutionary overcoming. The group was initially composed of artists and cultural producers but after a few years of existence most practicing artists were expelled as the group deemed the production of art works to be too compromised an activity. It was no longer possible to create individual art works and art had to become an activity outside the institution of art.

In his 1959 film, *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*, Guy Debord went to great lengths to avoid filming monuments. As he explained in the "Technical Notes" he prepared for the film, the camera had to avoid showing monuments at all times.⁴ In a film about the lives of young Lettrists in Paris in the early 1950s, this was difficult – but necessary. It was important not to show monuments so as not to naturalize them.

The Situationists saw the many monuments and statues in Paris as elements in a battle for the control of the city in which the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, went to great lengths to preserve historical monuments of French kings and emperors as part of its transformation of the city into an urban theatre.

MONUMENTS WERE PART of a struggle for urban space. As the Situationists put it in a 1962 text, no monuments were innocent.⁵ On the contrary, monuments and statues functioned as political statements in the class struggle. The ruling order filled the city with statues and monuments or emptied it to make room for



The statue of Charles Fourier erected at Place de Clichy in Paris in June 1899. PHOTO: ALAMY

cars. The built environment was a testimony to domination. Not only did the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, display their own grandeur in this way, but they also prevented the possibility of any other use of the city. It became filled with objects and artefacts. Statues, cars and advertisements were all part of the materialized ideology of the spectacle. They were anything but innocent; they were testimonies to a history of oppression and exploitation, of how the proletariat was robbed of control over their own lives through images of a commoditized existence. The past led naturally to the present, and the future was a variant of the present. There was nothing else. The spectacle was everywhere.

“Modern capitalism dissuades people from making any criticism of architecture with the simple argument that they need a roof over their heads, just as television is accepted on the grounds that they need information and entertainment. They are made to overlook the obvious fact that this information, this entertainment and this kind of dwelling place are not made for them, but without them and against them.”⁶

The Situationists sought to challenge this situation by intervening in the culture of the ruling class. The Situationists fought in the world of the bourgeoisie, in the city, but against it: the city understood as a whole civilization, capitalism as a way of life that had hastily been built after the destruction of the World War. The small Situationist group fought with and against the images and representations, including statues, that the bourgeoisie had spread everywhere. It was an ideological war they were engaged in, and they understood the action in Place Clichy as a battle in this war. As a kind of guerrilla action on enemy territory.

Authorities in stone

As Henri Lefebvre, friend of the Situationist group, wrote in *La production de l'espace*, monuments are a way of stopping history. They produce or occupy a space and postpone the future by preserving the past or the present. Monuments are almost always traces of violence and death, but they are characterized by “a generally accepted Power”.⁷ Once erected, they produce “a consensus [...] in the strongest sense of the term”, writes Lefebvre.⁸ Now they are there. This is the way the world is organized, they seem to say. “Small wonder that from time immemorial conquerors and revolutionaries eager to destroy a society should so often have sought to do so by burning or razing that society’s monuments.”⁹ Monuments transform a brutal reality into “a materially realized appearance”.¹⁰

PERHAPS THE MOST RADICAL critique of monuments was formulated by Georges Bataille in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when he wrote a series of short texts on the counter-revolutionary function of architecture. “Thus great monuments rise up like dams, opposing a logic of majesty and authority to all unquiet elements. [...] Indeed, monuments obviously inspire good social behavior and often even genuine fear. The fall of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of things. This mass movement is difficult to explain otherwise than by popular hostility towards monuments which are their veritable masters.”¹¹ Bataille understood monuments as authorities in stone, imposing admiration and astonishment on the masses. The monument is an attempt to stabilize and dominate space. They issue “authoritative commands and prohibitions”, wrote Bataille.¹² The storming of the Bastille in Paris during the French Revolution was a natural reaction to this submission, a rejection of society’s authorized super-ego. It was telling that the masses not only stormed the prison, but quickly tore down the whole building.

The fight over the statues in the city is always part of a larger



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Certain founding members of the Situationist International in 1957. From left to right: Guiseppe Pinot-Gallizio, Piero Simondo, Elena Verone, Michele Bernstein, Guy Debord, Asger Jorn, and Walter Olmo.

struggle. Bataille, Lefebvre and the Situationists make us aware of this. Statues are large, three-dimensional incarnations of power, placed on high pedestals and made of durable materials such as stone, marble or bronze. They are substitutes for the people they represent.

When activists in Martinique in 1991 cut off the head of a statue of Joséphine de Beauharnais and painted her neck red, it was, of course, an attack on the continuing (post)colonial oppression on the island.¹³ Like Guadeloupe, Martinique remains part of France and has the status of a ‘French overseas department’. In the 1660s, the local population was massacred by French colonizers and plantations with enslaved Africans were established on the island. Inspired by the Haitian slave revolt led by Toussaint L’Ouverture, slavery was then abolished in Marti-

nique in 1794. However, it was reintroduced in 1802 by Napoleon, advised by his then wife, Josephine de Beauharnais, who grew up as the daughter of a French plantation owner on the island who owned 300 slaves. In 1856, a statue of Josephine de Beauharnais was erected in Fort-de-France, the capital of the island. It was this statue that activists beheaded in 1991. The Empress lost her head.

The activists did what should have happened during the French Revolution, when de Beauharnais had been arrested with her first husband, Alexandre de Beauharnais, and narrowly escaped the guillotine.

THE 1991 ACTION in Martinique is part of a history that includes not only the 2020 statue topplings, but also the storming of the Bastille in 1789 and the toppling of the Vendôme Column in 1871. These are iconoclastic attacks on an oppressive racial-colonial order that consistently divides the dangerous classes in order to ensure the accumulation of capital.

“THE MONUMENT IS AN ATTEMPT TO STABILIZE AND DOMINATE SPACE.”

“Monumentalization of violence”

The toppling of the statue of Napoleon in Place Vendôme stands as a high point in the history of the anti-colonial reconquest of the city by the lower classes. The iconoclasm of the communards was part of a large-scale attempt to create the conditions for a communist life where everyone could express themselves beyond established hierarchies, political, religious and artistic, where everyone was (virtually) creative beyond class and racialization.¹⁴ The statue of Napoleon was toppled in a carefully orchestrated political event organized by Gustave Courbet. It was not just a sudden outburst of popular discontent against the emperor, but part of a visual campaign to destroy the symbols of the old imperial order so that a new life in Paris could be possible. As photographs of the event show, a huge crowd gathered in the square, which had been renamed Place Internationale, and three orchestras played in turn before the statue of the emperor was finally toppled. It had been sawed off at the bottom, so it toppled like a giant tree as one of the orchestras played the Marseillaise. The crowd cheered ecstatically as the 40-metre-long column, consisting of melted-down cannons from the Battle of Austerlitz with the statue of Napoleon at the top, dressed as a Roman Caesar, toppled over. Maxime Vuillaume described the toppling as a decisive event: “Suddenly, there it is, like the flapping of the wings of a gigantic bird, a huge zigzag through the air. Oh, I will never forget the colossal shadow falling past my eyes! A cloud of smoke. All is over. The column lies on the ground, cracked, its stone viscera exposed to the wind. Caesar lies humiliated and headless.”¹⁵ The emperor, enthroned in the centre of the square, was gone. No one would look up to him anymore.

DURING THE OCCUPATION of the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris in May-June 1968, members of the Situationist group had found the mold for the statue of Fourier that had stood in Place Clichy until December 1941, and Pierre Lepetit had made a copy of the statue.¹⁶ The bronze statue of Fourier had originally been removed by the Vichy government and sent to Germany where, along with a number of other statues, it was molded into ammunition for Hitler’s army on the Eastern Front. From October 1941 to August 1944, according to historian Kirrily Freeman, the Vichy government collected at least 1,500 statues in France that were sent to Germany.¹⁷ Considering how many statues and monuments either consist of melted down cannons or depict weapons and war equipment, it is not as strange as it may sound that the French collaborationist government, on its own initiative, collected the many sculptures and sent them to Nazi Germany in support of the Nazi war machine. As W.J.T. Mitchell, among others, has described, monuments are historically inextricably linked to war and violence. “From Ozymandias to Caesar to Na-



Communards and Gustave Courbet pose with the statue of Napoléon I from the toppled Vendôme column, Paris 1871.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

oleon to Hitler, public art has served as a kind of monumentalization of violence.”¹⁸

Fourier

This was not the case with the Fourier statue. It had been erected as a tribute to the utopian socialist who has inspired generations of revolutionaries – from Marx to Benjamin, Marcuse and Norman O. Brown – with his ideas of free sex and a radical rethinking of work through play. We can hardly get further away from emperors and kings than Fourier.

The statue of Fourier itself had been erected in 1899 with funds raised by a small group of enthusiastic Fourierists in Paris. The statue showed an elderly, seated Fourier wearing a long coat with a cane resting on one arm, looking thoughtful. It was the work of the anarchist sculptor Émile Derré, who had modeled the statue on a painting of Fourier by Jean Gigoux from 1835, a few years before Fourier’s death in 1837. The location of the statue in Place Clichy was quite fitting; Montmartre was at the time a working-class neighborhood where many artists hung out, and Fourier was buried in the Montmartre cemetery just around the corner.

The Situationists loved Fourier. He was at the centre of the anti-Stalinist revolutionary tradition in which they saw themselves. Fourier was an early critic of industrial capitalism and its forms of wage labor, which, he argued, destroyed people as well as nature.¹⁹ Capitalist organized wage labor was nothing less than contrary to the order of the universe, according to Fourier, whose critique of early industrialization had a distinct metaphysical dimension. It was morally necessary to reject wage labor, according to Fourier. Man was a creative and collective being who had to express himself in community with others and seek to satisfy his needs. If the worker did not want to go to work, it was work

that was the problem, not the worker. This was an important critique of wage labor, according to the Situationists, who fought fiercely against the sacralization of work that had occurred during the 20th century, when European social democrats and Leninists alike glorified wage labor and made it a cornerstone of their political projects. For the traditional labor movement, it was about producing a new world in which workers took control of the productive apparatus. Such a project, however, had nothing to do with communism, the Situationists argued, citing both Fourier and Marx: communism was the abolition of both wage labor and the nation state. It was not the workers taking control of capitalist production.

FOURIER'S CRITIQUE of wage labor and his ideas about the creative qualities of man made him an ally in the Situationists' struggle against the falsification of communism. Along with Marx, Bakunin, Luxemburg and German-Dutch council communism, Fourier was part of a repressed wild socialism that the Situationists orientated themselves towards and tried to practice at a time in the 1960s when a booming economy allowed capital to strike a deal with local working-class representatives in the West, offering workers access to culture, education and consumption. The Situationists famously saw this development as a "colonization of everyday life", where colonial plunder and factory exploitation were complemented by the alienation of workers in their free time. More and more aspects of human life were commodified and took the form of commodity images. It was therefore necessary to intervene into and try to scramble the new world of images, to show that the new abundance, all the new commodities, washing machines, cars and cigarettes, were in fact weapons in an image-political struggle for the consciousness of the proletariat. All the many images made up a new world that threatened to erase any alternative and sever the link to previously unrealized historical potentials, such as Fourier's utopian socialism.

Symbolic reproduction

The spectacle or the spectacular was a description of the shift in which images became the material that politics necessarily was made of. Political events have always had a visual dimension, of course, but during the 20th century this dimension was greatly accentuated and tended to transform politics altogether. This is what the Situationists tried to describe with terms such as spectacle and the spectacular. It was not least thanks to new technologies of reproduction such as radio, film and television that this metamorphosis took place. But it cannot be reduced to the emergence of new media; what matters is how society creates images of itself through concepts, notions and all the many media at its disposal – from statues to television and the internet.

For the Situationists, the new, of course, was the medium of television. They saw de Gaulle addressing the nation and the individual Frenchman through television. He appeared on the

screen and spoke directly to the citizens. But they also saw how the new consumer goods, from Coca Cola to washing machines, record players and cars, created a new mesmerizing world of objects and goods that promised happiness, comfort or excitement. All you had to do was choose. The many commodities all promised a new life, or at least a moment of pleasure or distraction. Instant satisfaction. The spectacle was a new phase in the terrible subsumption of life in the service of capital, where the boundary between "reality" and "the spectacular" was dissolved. Culture merged with capital and citizens were integrated from above. The individualism of mass culture was a pseudo-individualism, the result of the fusion of artistic techniques and advertising.

The Situationists' analysis of the coming into being of new forces and means of symbolic reproduction was to a large extent the inspiration for Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum and Fredric Jameson's use of the notion of postmodernism. The dramatic changes to the conditions of the production of the image transformed politics.

The storming of Congress on January 6, 2021, was in many ways the paradoxical culmination of this process, with fascists and conspiracy theorists entering Congress and disrupting Senate approval of Biden's electoral victory. Trump's motley storm troopers, dressed in Braveheart costumes and camouflage, entered the capital and stormed the "Winter Palace". And took selfies while they did it. Not only did we all see it, they saw themselves doing it. And the event will probably act as a mobilizing factor for the late fascist movement in the US. It was probably less the end of the Trump presidency than the beginning of a new phase of colonial-racist violence. Late fascism is by no means defeated, and the storm was a charivari, a noisy example of what it is capable of and how it has already spread its tentacles far into, for example, the police, who did very little to stop the attack. Events like the attack on Congress help make previously unthinkable acts possible and introduce ultra-nationalist and racist ideas into a mainstream culture already characterized by an almost narcotic addiction to images of violence (against women and non-whites).²⁰

IT WAS THE EARLY phase of this expansive visual culture that the Situationists were trying to catch up with. What happens when political events take place as image events, when the political is not just mediated by images, but is images? And how do you fight this dominance of images? The Situationists understood it, as I said, as a colonization in which the commodity subordinated more and more parts of human life, including art: Spheres and practices which, for various reasons, previous modes of production had not subsumed, but which now, in this phase of capitalism, were beginning to enter into the reproduction of capitalist society. The grandiose and desperate tone that pervaded the texts of the Situationists has to do with this process, which the Situationists perceived as a closure. History is quickly being

**"CULTURE
MERGED WITH
CAPITAL AND
CITIZENS WERE
INTEGRATED
FROM ABOVE."**

emptied of content and becomes a dead postcard time.

But the Situationists sought to activate history against the spectacular, “fanning the spark of hope in the past”, as Walter Benjamin puts it.²¹ They sought to intervene in the spectacle against the spectacle. To create confusion among all the many images and false promises. The spectacle was everywhere, it was a global totality, there was nothing outside. Even the media of art such as painting or happening were passive spectacular relations, therefore the role of art as a transgressive act was now to dominate these media as means of propaganda. Art had become an art of war, where those who were formerly called artists used all available means, including what was left of art, to propagandistically create unrest and fight the spectacle.

THE COPY OF THE STATUE of Fourier was an intervention in the spectacle. And the authorities were not slow to react. As the Situationists wrote in their journal, a policeman was immediately placed in front of the statue until it was removed two days later. The Situationist command had put the statue in place in fifteen minutes using wooden beams. The authorities, on the other hand, used a crane and 30 police officers to remove it again, the Situationists noted with great satisfaction in their account in their journal.²² The action was considered a success by the Situationists. It was an example of a heavy-handed détournement, where the iconoclasm of the state was momentarily challenged by an iconoclasm from below. And the attempt to quickly remove the traces of the replica of the statue of Fourier and its reactivation of the events of the previous year confirmed the Situationists’ analysis of the French state as a new form of colonization. De Gaulle was Pétain, and there was no essential difference between Vichy and the V. Republic.

For the hundreds of people who saw the Situationists lift the statue back into place, the city was suddenly different. And passers-by could laugh at the policeman in front of Fourier in the days that followed. Not that the Situationists imagined that the action would bring about any major changes, of course they didn’t. The action was a revolutionary practical joke, and they were fully aware of the need to carry out a much more comprehensive attack on the spectacular commodity economy beyond any reference to notions of aesthetic qualities. It was important which statues stood in the city squares, but the project was not to put up any other statues, the project was to change the city. ❌

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen is Professor of Political Aesthetics at the University of Copenhagen

references

- 1 Guy Debord describes the action in a letter to the Italian section of the Situationist group, dated March 12, 1969. Guy Debord, *Correspondance. Volume 4, 1969–1972* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 42. The twelfth and last issue of the Situationist journal briefly presents the action at Place Clichy. *Internationale situationniste*, no. 12, 1969, 97–98. François de Beaulieu, who participated in the action, talks about the action in an interview with Christophe Bourseiller, “L’homme est un homme pour l’homme”, in *Archives & Documents situationnistes*, no. 3, 2003, 17–25.
- 2 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle [La Société du Spectacle, 1967]*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).
- 3 Cf. Jacqueline Lalouette, *Les statues de la discorde* (Paris: Passés Composés, 2021), 22.
- 4 Guy Debord, “Fiche technique” [1964], in idem: *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 486.
- 5 Guy Debord, Attila Kotányi and Raoul Vaneigem, “Theses on the Paris Commune” [“Sur la commune”, 1962], translated by Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Online*, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/commune.html>
- 6 Attila Kotányi and Raoul Vaneigem, “Basic Program for the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism”, 1961, translated by Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Online*, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/bureau.html>
- 7 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space [La production de l’espace, 1974]*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Blackwell, 1991), 220.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 220.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 221.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 221.
- 11 Georges Bataille, “Architecture” [“Architecture”, 1929], translated by Iain White, in Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg (eds.), *Encyclopædia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 35.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 13 For an analysis of the beheading of the statue of Joséphine de Beauharnais, see Kylie Sago, “Beyond the Headless Empress: Gabriel Vital Dubray’s Statues of Josephine, Eduard Glissant’s *Tout-monde*, and Contested Monuments of French Empire”, in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 41, no. 5, 2019, 501–519.
- 14 Cf. Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London & New York: Verso, 2015).
- 15 Maxime Vuillaume, *Mes cahiers rouges au temps de la Commune* [1909] (Paris: Albin Michel, 1971), 247.
- 16 Cf. “Pierre Lepetit: 1935–1989”, in *Encyclopédie des nuisances*, nr. 14, 1989, XII.
- 17 Kirrily Freeman, *Bronze to Bullets: Vichy and the Destruction of French Public Statuary, 1941–1944* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- 18 W.J.T. Mitchell, “The Violence of Public Art: Do the Right Thing”, in idem (ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 35.
- 19 For a good introduction to Fourier, see René Schérer, *Charles Fourier ou la contestation globale* (Paris: Seghers, 1970).
- 20 Cf. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Late Capitalist Fascism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).
- 21 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” [“Über den Begriff der Geschichte”, 1940], translated by Harry Zohn, in idem, *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 391.
- 22 “The Return of Charles Fourier” [“Le retour de Charles Fourier”, 1969], translated by Reuben Keehan, *Situationist International Online*, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/fourier.html>