

MONEY, SEX AND POWER:

ON A SHAM BIOGRAPHY

OF GUY DEBORD

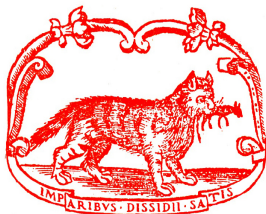
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Translated from French by
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PRAGUE
31 december 2015

Our age is the first in world history to claim as its sole enemies those that it manufactures itself, on its own terms and for its own spectacular purposes. Projecting all its characteristic infamy and brutality onto these simulated foes, it claims to oppose them resolutely; for as long as it needs to convince the electorate, it even pretends to take up arms against such fake enemies, which it portrays as evil and to which it lends the features of an Osama bin Laden or an Islamic State.

If it is to combat only artificial, stage-managed enemies, our world must work diligently to conceal and permanently destroy so much as the memory of its real confirmed enemies of old and to preserve the new century from any risk of undesirable contagion from them. This makes a permanent state of emergency *de rigueur*. Declared in fact against society at large, this state of emergency purports to be directed at the new enemy, obscure and indeterminate, that the spectacle has fashioned for itself, namely an artificial terrorism, created and performed to persuade us that States are fighting evil for our good and that those who fight absolute evil necessarily embody absolute good. The Ministry of Truth “corrects” history on a daily basis, be it that of the Bataclan or of other episodes, updating it weekly without fear of contradiction: new corrections can always be made later.

To do away with any remnants of real opposition the powers in place are obliged to make examples – to burn witches, to execute (if only in effigy) every enemy that is not an official one, as designated day by day. Nor is it only authentic opponents that must be destroyed, but also all those who may have existed earlier, whose memory and model have to be erased, demolished or besmirched. Every tendency to revolt and desire for change among younger generations

must be thwarted and struck down, and all precedents for them and the very memory of those precedents smothered. Any conceivable emulation has to be forestalled. All Walter Benjamins driven to suicide. Lists of subversives drawn up. Genuine rebellions, along with genuine rebels, crushed once and for all, eliminated, denounced, smeared and pilloried in view of the absolute need to highlight only deliberately fabricated and fetishized adversaries.

This is the unavoidable and urgent requirement that the most recent book by Jean-Marie Apostolidès is meant to help meet. It is a volume of over five hundred pages, plus ninety pages of notes, published by Flammarion and retailing at 28 euros. The title is *Debord le Naufrageur* (Debord the Wrecker) and the book is part of a series self-dubbed “Great Biographies.”

Let me say straight away that this work, as I shall show, apart from being a crashing bore, is *in no way a biography*. I spent a mere three hours with it, for after all there is no need to drink five hundred litres of wine to tell whether it is good or bad – or indeed to know that it is not wine at all (as, *mutatis mutandis*, is the case here).

The task that the author frankly tells us he set himself was “to generate a different, ‘negative’ image of Debord,” an assertion to which he adds boastfully that this was “no simple undertaking.”¹

Simple undertaking or not, let me say that there was never any such thing as a true biography expressly intended to offer a “negative” (or for that matter a “positive”) image of the life of its subject: such purposes are those of propaganda. Nor does “negative” for Apostolidès have any of its noble dialectical connotations: for him the word has only the vulgar

1. http://next.liberation.fr/livres/2015/12/23/guy-debord-n-a-pas-ete-capable-d-appliquer-dans-sa-vie-les-principes-qu-il-revendiquait-en-theorie_1422482

sense of ignominious or morally disreputable – its most banal meaning, no more than that.

Genuine biographies are the work of archivists, philologists, scholars and historians, not of partisans whether pro or con. A biography is not a football match. Even less an exercise in psychoanalysis – an approach that is always arbitrary. Ever since the Renaissance the terms according to which an individual should be portrayed have been clear: What did the person say? What did the person do?¹

The doyen of modern biographers, Roberto Ridolfi, who has left us definitive masterworks on the lives of Machiavelli, Guicciardini and Savonarola, argued convincingly that “Love and affinities help one to understand.... If a constitution of the republic of letters were promulgated (awful thought), it should compel biographers to portray only subjects in some way similar to or congenial to themselves: so much flabby, mediocre and fallacious work would thus be avoided.”²

Apostolidès’s book is the very paradigm of such bad work. And bad, let me add, in three respects: bad in its *aims*, bad in its *method*, and hence *very* bad in the *end result*.

Bad in its *aims*, because this is in no sense a biography of Guy Debord, but rather a long-winded piece of investigative journalism directed *against* Debord that offers only hostile “testimony” and not a word about Debord’s work, about his art and his time, about his cinema, or about his courage in a position of virtual isolation. So the book is of strictly no value to

1. Cf. Francesco Guicciardini, Benedetto Varchi, Giorgio Vasari, Ludovico Ariosto and any number of others.

2. Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardi* (Rome: Belardetti, 1960). English translation by Cecil Grayson: *The Life of Francesco Guicciardini* (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. viii (translation modified).

historians. It is simply not a *source*. The author's use of documentation is deeply dishonest, for he selects only what he deems inculpatory. Here indeed "the truth immediately becomes a moment of the false" – as though to prove yet again what Debord taught those who could hear him. Not to mention the sheer cowardice implied by this inept attempt to assassinate someone already dead. Corpses attract vultures, naturally. And this book stinks of death. Its author is driven by what Spinoza called "the sad passions", and he is thus in perfect harmony with the Neo-Con times we inhabit, times that seem to fit Apostolidès like a glove. His book was in fact written for the present moment and is not meant to last. It will soon be forgotten.

Bad work too as to its *method*, because it views a bygone period through the eyes and according to the "values" of today, whereas the prime duty of the biographer is to insert himself thoroughly into the historical context and grasp the motor forces and conflictual dynamics that spur a period's protagonists to action. I found nothing in this book, for instance, of the fearlessness and grit of the Situationists in general and of Debord in particular, alone as they were at the time in attacking both wings of a dominant spectacle that juggled the contrasting lies of Right and Left: Western "freedom" versus Eastern "equality". This was a time when all the Apostolidèses were lining up to pay obeisance to the Pope, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao or Castro.

The archival work here is perfectly biased and tendentious; the philology resembles nothing so much as a police report; the scholarship is partisan and summary; historiography and honesty are simply absent.

I should have liked to speak merely of the work, and not of the author, but that is impossible, for the work speaks to us only of him, of the spirit, intent and goals which, so he tells us, defined ten years of composition after forty years of reading.

Lastly, the *end result* is very bad, because the figure portrayed resembles Guy Debord not at all, and I say so as one who unarguably knew the man well. This alleged life teaches us far more about the author's obsessions, pettiness and underhandedness than anything of the kind he claims to discover in Debord. Beyond such claims he sees and seeks nothing; beneath them, all that is discernible is ill-will, resentment and babbling animus. The ideological, distorting and acritical lenses of our ignorant times offer scant hope of apprehending the vicissitudes, meaning, stakes or values of those days - values which, incidentally, we rejected. What could be more anti-historical than to view the last century in general, or the radically conflict-ridden situation that motivated us in particular, in the sinister light of "political correctness" or "gender studies"? Were Apostolidès to read Machiavelli's rich correspondence, which deals at length with women and pederasts, paedophiles, prostitutes, etc. - in short with the stuff of life - he would no doubt be thoroughly scandalised, and produce an enormous tome to alert us to the fact that Machiavelli was not after all a "great man". He is welcome to his inflated and viscous opinions, but the only information they convey is about himself.

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto Brutus the things that are his: there is no denying that without the theory of the spectacle developed by Debord the world we are in would still be quite incomprehensible and unpredictable, just as those who rule it would like it to be, and as it indeed remains for Apostolidès. But not for those with weighty military or financial responsibilities. Should a chief of staff fail quickly to grasp what really lies behind the Islamic State, this will have direr consequences than the errors of a university professor. And to grasp such things it is useful, even essential, to be acquainted with the theory of the spectacle. After nearly fifty years, this theory remains the Rosetta Stone indispensable for

deciphering the hieroglyphs of today's world. But all this is beyond the scope of our professor.

The Society of the Spectacle is one of three books of the twentieth century, alongside George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, that are still vital to any understanding of the twenty-first.

As for what *does* interest Professor Apostolidès, his book is packed with glaring distortions of fact. It is a completely false claim, for example, that Debord ever raped his sister. The two loved one another, quite simply. Where is the crime? The dust and cobwebs that obscure the author's mind and obsessed soul confine him within a hypocritical moralism and a politically correct dishonesty that leave their mark throughout his book. I am not going to count the instances, and I am sure I have not noticed them all, but I have seen quite enough: all the falsifications, all the factual and hermeneutic and even dating errors, not to mention the overarching arbitrariness of interpretation drenched in the psychoanalytical sauce with which Apostolidès loves to dress his tiresome, repetitious and error-filled discourse before sprinkling it with the pseudo-neutral deodorant of academic research.

The fact is that this so-called biography's main object is to communicate only what its myth-making narrator considers notable about Debord, and accordingly we are treated to whatever trivialities serve to buttress his preconceived thesis. Debord's entire thought, work and action, like those of the groups he animated, as well as the general historical context in and *against* which we were acting, all vanishes completely. Apostolidès does not so much as mention the Strasbourg scandal and its crucial influence as a catalyst of May 1968. That struggle, its stakes and its seriousness, find no place in his book. The author also completely ignores the proliferation of Situationist theories and practice. Not a word, for instance, about what was perhaps the first work of street art or guerrilla

art, our reinstallation of a statue of Charles Fourier in Place Clichy, Paris, in 1969, the original having been removed by the Nazis. Nothing, of course, of the magnificently successful creation of situations by the Yesmen; or by the Russian Voina group and Pussy Riot, who acknowledge their debt to Debord and the Situationists; nothing either of the Czech Stovoven group, or Banksy, or *Kommunikationsguerilla*, or the hacktivists, or a host of others too numerous to cite here who have put the Situationist legacy to practical use. Not to mention the wide-ranging influence exerted by the Situationists not only on all subsequent critical social theory but also on various kinds of *détournement*, class struggle and sabotage practised in factories and offices in Italy and elsewhere. This is the sense in which the Situationist International was an avant-garde. All of this, for the professor, is a complete blank. So much for scholarship.

Everything Debord ever did, if we are to believe Apostolidès, was determined by the loss of his father, which meant that he was deprived of any male presence to confront. This allegedly prevented him from becoming a man: he never matured, never left childhood. And that is all - the key, the main thesis of the book. By that yardstick it must be said that in his fatherlessness Debord was at least in good company, including that of Nietzsche, Plato, Aristotle, Schopenhauer, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky, Swift - and, *si parva licet componere magnis*, myself. Leopardi goes even further, noting in his *Pensieri* that “when, in reviewing the lives of the illustrious, one pauses to consider those whose renown reposes solely upon their actions and not their writings, one is hard put to it to find even one individual endowed with true greatness who was not in their childhood deprived of the presence of a father.”

Hegel repeatedly poured scorn on what he called psychological meanness or “psychological pedantry” - the

“so-called psychological approach which contrives to attribute all actions to the heart”: “that view of history which seeks to disparage all great deeds and persons” and “overlooks what is substantive” in individual actions. This is the view of “the valet for whom there are no heroes not because there are no heroes but because he is only a valet.” Or again: “What schoolmaster has not demonstrated of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar that they were impelled by the passions and were therefore immoral characters. From which it at once follows that the schoolmaster himself is a more admirable man than they were.... Historical personages who are waited upon in the history books by such valet-psychologists certainly come out the worse for it: they are reduced to the same level of morality, or rather to a level several degrees lower than these fine connoisseurs of men.” “The consciousness that thus passes judgement is in consequence *itself* base and mean.... It is, furthermore, hypocrisy.”¹

It should be noted that this same Apostolidès came up earlier, as early as 1999, with an adulatory, albeit erroneous book entitled *Les Tombeaux de Guy Debord* (The Tombs of Guy Debord).²

The well-trodden path taken by small minds of this kind (always intellectuals) never varies; it must be embedded in their DNA, and it is very easy to map. There are four stages: (1) acclaim and shameless glorification; (2) the construction of a mythical king for themselves; (3) the attempt to find a place in that monarch’s court or following; and (4) eventually, when it becomes less perilous, the desire to kill him, the erection of their guillotine, and an act of regicide meant to erase their former crass toadying as courtiers and parasites. Debord has fallen prey to this treatment. What

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, § 124, T.M. Knox translation, p.84; *Phenomenology of Mind*, J. B. Baillie translation, Torchbook edition, p. 673; *Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree translation, p. 47. (Translations modified.)

2. Paris: Exils Éditeur.

could be more telling than the present silence of his former defenders? Where are they all hiding? Was all it took to shut them up and have them melt away like snow in the sunshine the appearance of an Apostolidès? If so, it means that this book has produced at least one benefit, because their mute invisibility is far preferable to their previous clamour. It is true that the wind has changed: the time of Terror has begun. And, for them, the time of cowardice will never end.

As already noted, the book we are considering contains not the slightest whiff of adventure, passion, strong friendships, mature generosity, persecutions endured, dangers disdained, art, play, poetry, risks run, courage, invention, creativity, diversion, or fantasy. In short, everything missing from the professor's life is likewise missing from his book, just as one might expect. Further proof, if proof were needed, that this work is a projection, a portrait, of its author, his problems with women, with money, with power, a mirror held up to his multifarious humiliations and grudges, his petty desire for retribution – and not by any stretch of the imagination a portrait of Debord. He affects to be scandalised when noting that Gérard Lebovici and myself, as well, of course, as Michèle Bernstein, helped Debord financially. According to Apostolidès, Debord swindled us; he is so cheap that he cannot conceive of any more elevated reason. Going by this yardstick he might as well accuse all great artists of swindling their benefactors, ignoring the fact that they gave far more to humanity than they took, and that it is humanity as a whole that is indebted to *them*. The only real swindle here is to my mind Apostolidès's book itself.

Since the author is kind enough never, even on a single page, to conceal his *wish to denigrate* – the sole point, I have to concede, upon which he is sincere and disciplined – he renders everything he mentions vulgar, which once again speaks volumes about himself: wherever you open the book, you encounter

nothing but the profoundly sordid, mean-spirited, or obscene. Henry Miller put his finger exactly on this kind of mentality: “Obscenity exists only in the minds that discover it and charge others with it.”¹

The only issues that count for our would-be biographer are *money*, *sex*, and *power*. These obsess him, just as they obsess our contemporaries, precisely inasmuch as he lacks them.

All these things existed in our day, of course, but they were not as *separate* from life as they are now. We experienced them directly. As Debord put it, the only legitimate problem with money is the prospect of running out of it. We practised solidarity and mutual aid – likewise inconceivable for the professor. Apostolidès is so obsessed that he deems us to have been rapists: after all, assuming we were the monsters he describes, how else could we have had so much success with the opposite sex? How strange that no one has ever come forward to complain: have all our victims been waiting patiently for this avenger of a professor to ride up and deliver justice?

Were he called upon to discuss the *Odyssey*, Apostolidès would never get beyond the fleas on Ulysses’ head, because he can never perceive anything above his own level, and everything is therefore brought down to that level. If he could, I believe he would like to ruin the reputation of Stanford University all by himself. What he clearly demonstrates here is a destructive cynicism towards everything he once cherished. He seems to be afflicted by a Thersites complex. In continually reminding the reader of the place where he teaches – as though this somehow gave him *carte blanche* to commit any kind of abuse – he shows not the least compunction at dragging the university that feeds him into his *cupio dissolvi*. And his cynicism absolves him of any shame over fooling his readers and students. Were it within his

1. Miller in *Obscenity and the Law of Reflection* (Yonkers, NY: Alicat Books, 1945), quoting Theodore Schroeder’s *A Challenge to Sex Censors* (1938).

power, he would love to deceive the whole of a posterity which he naïvely expects to bathe him in glory - if not for other things, then at least for this book. If anyone is a wrecker, it is surely Jean-Marie Apostolidès.

As if writing for Wikipedia, Apostolidès adds pedantic and punctilious notes and references to give his quite arbitrary portrait and toxic outpourings a serious air. Unfortunately his notes offer only fallacious support for his twisted hypotheses, while everything else is beyond his ken. It is well known that carefully chosen references can prove anything or the opposite of anything, render any falsehood plausible. Apparently, however, the author's goal is simply to reverse the ancient injunction *Omnes homines honorare*. He seems driven by an irresistible urge to dishonour all those, and especially his main target, in whose case he pulls no low blows, with his foul discourse. Does he imagine that he can raise his own stock by denigrating that of others? If so, he fails even there, for his confabulations speak to us only of his miserable self.

This book may properly be described as *pornography*, albeit a cheap kind of pornography worthy of a sleazy magazine, the kind that would have no place in my own collection of erotica, which contains not a few examples of very fine pornography. This is a book designed after the fashion of a morbid website: such is its claim to “modernity”. With his valet's eye, Apostolidès looks through the keyhole of the house of his masters. For this new Erostratus, my archives, deposited in a library at Yale, become simply one of the keyholes through which to peer like a cop, seeing only what he seeks, missing all else, and what he seeks has nothing whatever to do with freedom, criticism, struggle, with poetry, or indeed with anything save his puny and demeaning rage.

I once before had occasion to refer to this same Apostolidès. In a letter to Mustapha Khayati dated 10

December 2012, and since published by others on the Internet, I wrote this:

Some real pearls can be found in the writings of these apologists [for Debord]. One example is supplied by a certain Apostolidès, who, in his passion to have me disappear, reaches interpretative heights that the KGB could scarcely rival: seeking to complete his “proof” that “Censor”¹ was not Sanguinetti but actually Debord, after asserting that Debord’s French translation is more “elegant” than the Italian original [!?!], he removes any shadow of a doubt by means of the following brilliant piece of scholarship: “Note the affinities between the two names Censor and Debord: they both have two syllables, identical vowels and the same number of letters.”²

Now, the “affinity” on whose basis I actually chose the pseudonym of Censor was in fact that with Bancor, the supranational currency imagined by Keynes, but also the nom de plume of the governor of the Bank of Italy at that time, Guido Carli. A far cry indeed from the miraculous deductions of an Apostolidès, that sad orphan child of Pope Pius XII, Mao and Lenin, who, truth to tell, displays nothing so much as his spasmodic attachment to a spectacular cult of the personality.

And I went on:

This first wave of makeshift “historians” readily turned themselves into human torches on the altar of sycophantic praise – praise which, as Guy liked to recall, quoting Swift, is “the daughter of present power”. If Debord had ever got wind of these elegists, I fancy he would have concurred with Schopenhauer:

1. Censor, *Rapporto veridico sulle ultime possibilità di salvare il capitalismo in Italia* (Milan: Ugo Mursia, 1975). Debord’s French translation: Censor (Gianfranco Sanguinetti), *Véridique Rapport sur les dernières chances de sauver le capitalisme en Italie, suivi de Preuves de l’inexistence de Censor par son auteur* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1976).

2. Apostolidès, *Tombeaux*, p. 102, n. 8.

“That soon worms may be gnawing at my body is a thought I can abide, but the idea that professors might do the same to my philosophy fills me with horror.”

Such individuals may teach at a prestigious university but they are incapable of producing a real, rigorous or in any way serious historical and critical analysis: all they can muster is either the aforesaid *unctuous praise* or *spineless outrage*. Professor Apostolidès will continue in any case to stand as a shining example of everything an honest and disciplined researcher should avoid – a concrete instance, if ever there was, and a caution to every student, of the disastrous mingling of those two forms of dishonesty, both on shameless exhibition in a police report poorly disguised as a work of historical scholarship. One has to wonder just what, with teachers like this, the academy has become. One racket among others, one that obliges students to go into debt and turns them into downtrodden slaves on the threshold of their adult life? Or, as in the United States, to join the military in order to finance their tuition?

This book is hopelessly lacking in conviction, vigour, energy and freshness. It reads like work for hire, written on commission, a failed attempt to put Guy Debord and an entire movement in the stocks, something a world away from a faithful, legitimate and honest critique. Still, I draw comfort from its existence, for it signals that despite all their faults the Situationists continue to be a beacon of insubordination and a nightmare that still haunts the sleep of an era, a true successor to theirs, which cannot bear to have enemies that it has not manufactured for its own ends.

What is to be regretted - for I am fond of Dante's law of *contrapasso* - is that this professor is too insignificant for posterity to pay him any mind. But if ever he were to have a biographer, I trust that they would at least

be honest enough to convey all the mediocrity and risibility of their subject. But who could be interested in such a life? As Virgil tells Dante (*Inferno*, Canto III, 47-51) apropos of weak and cowardly souls:

Their miserable lives have sunk so low
That they must envy every other fate.
No word of them survives their living season.
Mercy and Justice deny them even a name.
*Let us not speak of them: look, and pass on.*¹

In all fairness, though, I must confess that in this book I very much appreciated a short note in which the author states that I refused him permission to publish my photographs, which is true, and I am happy for it, because it would be galling to be thanked by such an individual in such a work.

On the other hand I see that utterly spurious and insidious acknowledgements are made to friends of mine who in no way endorsed or assisted the author and who have absolutely no responsibility for his book. Yet more evidence of his lack of scruple when it comes to hoodwinking his readers by every possible means.

Just forty years ago, Debord drew my attention with amusement to an observation of Chateaubriand's in *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* which has lost nothing of its currency: "There are eras when contempt must be dispensed thriftily on account of the great number of the needy."

Let these words serve as justification for my parsimony in this respect.

Prague, 31 December 2015

1. Translated by John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1954).

