

ESPACIO, **TIEMPO** Y FORMA 13

AÑO 2020 ISSN 1130-2968 E-ISSN 2340-146X

SERIE VI GEOGRAFÍA REVISTA DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA





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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/etfvi.13.2020



UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA

La revista *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* (siglas recomendadas: ETF), de la Facultad de Geografía e Historia de la UNED, que inició su publicación el año 1988, está organizada de la siguiente forma:

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UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA Madrid, 2020

SERIE VI · GEOGRAFÍA N.º 13, 2020

ISSN 1130-2968 · E-ISSN 2340-146X

DEPÓSITO LEGAL
M-21.037-1988

URL
ETF VI · GEOGRAFÍA · http://revistas.uned.es/index.php/ETFVI

DISEÑO Y COMPOSICIÓN
Carmen Chincoa Gallardo · http://www.laurisilva.net/cch

Impreso en España · Printed in Spain
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ARTÍCULOS · ARTICLES

MAKING SPACE FOR FREEDOM: THE SITUATIONIST GUIDE TO PROTESTING

CREAR ESPACIO PARA LA LIBERTAD: LA GUÍA SITUACIONISTA PARA PROTESTAR

Thomas Brasdefer¹

Recibido: 17/08/2020 · Aceptado: 17/09/2020 DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/etfvi.13.2020.28046

Resumen

Usando como punto de partida la reacción de Guy Debord a la Rebelión de Watts en el año 1965, este artículo considera el situacionismo como un modelo agonístico al poder. El enfoque primario es, como debería ser, el espectáculo: al conectar cada fuerza de producción con cada producto del capitalismo, Debord representa el espectáculo como monopolio de producción espacial, incluso en aquellos espacios que parecerían rechazarlo. Desenfocados, relegados a la sombra, y afuera de cámara y de la escena, los que se oponen al espectáculo están construyendo un modelo social alternativo como deberían estarlo haciendo, donde la libertad y la economía se construyen y se logran de manera colectiva. Ilustro esta dialéctica con las revueltas y protestas de la primavera de 2020, que han reclamado libertad desde dentro del espectáculo.

Palabras clave

Debord; Poststructuralismo; Poder; Protestas; Libertad; Zonas Autónomas.

Abstract

Using Guy Debord's reaction to the Watts Rebellion of 1965 as a starting point, this article considers Situationism as an agonistic approach to power. The prime focus is on the spectacle, as it should be: by collating every force of production with every product of capitalism, Debord depicts the spectacle as a monopoly of spatial production, even in those spaces that ostensibly reject it. Out-of-focus, in the background and off-camera, those opposed to the spectacle are building an alternative social model as they ought to be, where freedom and economics are cooperatively achieved. I illustrate this dialectic with riots and protests that have occurred in the Spring of 2020, both claiming freedom from within the spectacle.

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Keywords

Debord; Poststructuralism; Power; Riots; Freedom; Autonomous Zones.

INTRODUCTION

The news media were in a fever: on June 9, 2020, «Seattle protesters declare 'cop free zone' after police leave precinct» (Ruiz, 2020). It was a spectacular development after weeks of protests in Seattle and around the United States, as Americans demanded accountability from law enforcement, and law enforcement exerted increased violence against Americans (Huber & Bosman, 2020). It was also short-lived: citing security concerns, law enforcement cleared the so-called «cop free zone» on July Ist following orders from the City's mayor (SPD Blotter, 2020).

For less than thirty days, the area garnered ranks of supporters and opponents, who expressed their sentiments with equal passion. On the left, observers hailed a «grand tradition of utopian experiments» (Yoder, 2020). On the right, authors warned that «anarchy in central Seattle isn't a 'festive zone'» (Stepman, 2020). Underlying the ideological disputes, one can find a common question for social scientists: who owns public space? (Orvell & Meikle, 2009; Madanipour, 2010) Human geographers have of course looked at this issue in the past, especially in terms of a spatial struggle between two opposing views of space. In 1995, Don Mitchell looked at disputes over People's Park in Berkeley and summarized these two camps: «public space as a place of unmediated political interaction, and public space as a place of order, controlled recreation, and spectacle.» (Mitchell, 1995: 128)

In this article, I will reconcile the two positions by examining them with Guy Debord's view of spectacle as a feature of capitalist society, and therefore a fixture of public space. In the *Society of Spectacle*, which is well-recognized as political and artistic manifesto (Merrifield, 2005), Debord advanced an explicitly geographical and agonistic formulation of public space. The streets, whose quintessential function is to be shared by citizens, are battlegrounds for the larger power struggle that exists in private spaces where economic activity prevails. Inasmuch as social conflicts are skirmishes in the larger struggle between humans and capitalism, public space is merely the place for unmediated political interaction to become visible; this is evidenced by the fact that public space is also the place for order to be restored without necessitating structural change. As Doreen Massey pointed out, this coincidence is not accidental: «The very fact that public places are necessarily negotiated, sometimes riven with antagonism, always contoured through the playing out of unequal social relations, is what renders them genuinely public.» (2005: 153)

Many have already observed that the United States are experiencing their most spectacular times (see for instance Zaretsky, 2017; Briziarelli & Armano, 2017). Moreover, the combination of civil unrest and the public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated new frictions between the need to stay at home and civic duties. I will take this opportunity to re-contextualize the principles introduced by Debord and Situationism, and anchor them in terms of a spatial dialectic. Using Debord's analysis of the Watts rebellion as an inflection

point, I will then look more specifically at the implications of this approach in terms of freedom.

1. DEBORD AND GEOGRAPHY

Guy Debord was a twentieth century French public intellectual, best known for his media criticism and early life activism. Though he did not complete a higher education degree, Debord was an avid reader and prolific contributor in various literary venues, especially the Letterist International and its successor, the Situationist International. As indicated by their names, these were Marxist organizations, and Debord's own work is strongly influenced by orthodox and Western Marxisms' expressed in references to Ludwig Feuerbach and Georg Lukacs. This overt stance may explain why his work has received only limited attention of its own merits, even though Debord was foundational for such luminaries as Henri Lefebvre (Merrifield, 2005) and Jean Baudrillard (Wark, 2011).

In the context of academic writing, Debord is also a cryptic, bombastic writer, juxtaposing popular music with Greek philosophy, sometimes accumulating dozens of references without quoting them directly. He first characterized his agenda as *détournement*, a word implying subversion that is most often found in criminal contexts: *détournement de fonds* is embezzlement; *détournement de mineur* is contributing to the delinquency of a minor; *détournement d'avion* is hijacking a plane. For Debord, *détournement* is the subversion of the dominant paradigm, a sabotage of academic and cultural principles. Whether or not his readers were familiar with the original authors, he recycled the zeitgeist in the same manner war propagandists did: «the main impact of a *détournement* is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements.» (Debord & Wolman, 1956/2006: 18)

One of his first *coups d'éclat* was the publication of a map: *The Naked City*, assembled from cut-up pieces and re-arranged to reflect affective correlations within the city of Paris (Pinder, 1996). Such work illustrates Debord's larger metagraphic technique, whose first effigy was:

a pinball machine arranged in such a way that the play of the lights and the more or less predictable trajectories of the balls would form a metagraphic-spatial composition entitled Thermal Sensations and Desires of People Passing by the Gates of the Cluny Museum Around an Hour after Sunset in November. (Debord & Wolman, 1956/2006)

This approach led Debord to a discipline termed psychogeography, «the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.» (Debord, 1955/2006: 8) He appreciated the «charmingly vague» nature of the concept, and found that the study of urban organizations, especially those close to him, provided plenty of avenues to explore. More so than his ideas, his approach mixing media, arts, sensations, and politico-economic factors were easily adopted, in

that they allowed anyone to feel empowered with their own space-making. Broadly speaking, Debord advocated for:

The production of psychogeographical maps, or even the introduction of alterations such as more or less arbitrarily transposing maps of two different regions, can contribute to clarifying certain wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but complete insubordination to habitual influences. (Debord, 1955/2006: 11)

In this sense, geography according to Debord connects to issues of place and space, partly economic geography, geography of power, political ecology, affect geography, all wrapped up in a holistic and particularistic approach that is perhaps closer to (auto)ethnography than it is to conventional geography. By way of methodology, Debord proposed a dialectic centered not on capitalist ownership of space, but rather on practices of individual freedom, which he called situations.

I believe that situations are overlooked in the current geographical literature involving Debord which focuses on his urban living. He and his entourage, the Situationists, are the subjects of several monographs (e.g. Plant, 1992; Wark, 2011) and they are much larger and more diverse than the ideas expressed herein. Moreover, two authors have already established the relevance of Situationists to geographical literature: Alastair Bonnett (1989) and David Pinder (1996, 2000, et seq.). These works contain caveats: Bonnett has pointed out that «Situationism is both too romantic and too rational a philosophy to be politically plausible.» (1989: 143); Pinder also granted that their strategies might be «problematic, not to say inadmissible» (2000: 380). Most recently, Bonnett has summarized the contribution of Situationism to geography thusly: «Much of this attention is focused on the radical nature of 'everyday space' and the 'suppression of the street' augured by modern traffic and modern planning.» (Bonnett, 2017)

I nevertheless believe there is merit in revisiting Debord's ideas as a Situationist dialectic, considering our spectacular times. Accordingly, I have provided my own translation of his work as I judged necessary in some places².

1.1. THE SPECTACLE

In *The Society of Spectacle*, Debord's most acclaimed work, he brought together several strands from his earlier writings under one roof. He described the spectacle first and foremost as a cut-up (or segmented) space but unlike his *détournement*, it is disconnected from experience and artificially designed to stand-in for reality: «qua concrete inversion of life, the autonomous movement of the non-living.» (Debord, 1971: 2).

^{2.} All references to Debord 1971 are my own translation of The Society of Spectacle; in lieu of page numbers, I have provided a reference to the thesis numbers. All emphases in original.

The spectacle appears simultaneously as society itself, as part of society, and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is expressly the area on which all eyes and all consciousness converge. By the very fact that this area is separated, it is the space for distracted eyes and false consciousness; and the unification it provides is nothing but an official language of generalized separation. (Debord, 1971: 3)

This disconnection is enabled as a byproduct of the capitalist machinery: when the production of capital was severed from the value of labor, commodities became objects of arbitrary value which came forth to replenish the world as social bonds receded in factory cities: «The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map that covers exactly its own territory. The same forces that have escaped us *manifest* themselves to us in all their power.» (Debord, 1971: 31) Elsewhere, Debord talks of a «commodity reality» (Debord, 1965/2006: 197). He therefore approached the same issue as non-representational theorists and for the same reason: when computer-assisted mapping came to expose the divide between precision and accuracy, the human variables between them became irrepressible (see Thatcher & Dalton, 2017 for a larger discussion of this particular aspect):

attempting to produce instant communities, worlds gathered around products and production processes which themselves become a vital part of what is regarded as product and production process; reworking space and time so that they fit this new kind of life, most especially by producing new prostheses which are also additions to cognition and precognition. (Thrift, 2008: 23)

Understanding spectacle as a prosthetic is only the beginning of understanding its spatial qualities. Following the unraveling thread of time (as Massey, 2005 did), Debord explored the territorial dimension of the spectacle, in a chapter entitled «Territorial Domination.» His setup for the chapter has been well-trodden, for instance the conception of a Third Space (a decompression stage between home and office), which Debord first identified in the work of Chombart de Lauwe (Debord, 1958/2006); the same approach was later taken up by Lefebvre's trialectics (Lefebvre, 1992) which found its way to Michel Foucault, Ray Oldenbourg, Homi Bhabha, Ed Soja and many others. As he teases out the social implications of third spaces, Debord casually expounds on the «factories as well as cultural centers, tourist resorts as well as 'housing projects' [...] specifically designed to serve this pseudocommunity,» (Debord, 1971: 172) up to the «giant supermarkets erected on bare land, with a parking lot pedestal» (Debord, 1971: 174) where one can socialize endlessly without ever meeting anyone new.

The spectacle is thus imposed through «an extensive and intensive process of *banalization*» (Debord, 1971: 165), achieved through the industrial production of representations. As objects are created, duplicated, transferred, replicated, destroyed, recreated, the space in which they exist becomes amorphous and impossible to fully identify with. Debord deplores the kind of urbanism that became co-opted by this process: the development of cities that imitate one another according to carefully chosen parameters, privileging business over the lives of citizens, even the usability of the city itself. The spectacle is thus defined by its calculations, its facticity, and

its uncritical embrace: «It is the *omnipresent* affirmation of a choice *already made* at the production stage, and its subsequent consumption.» (Debord, 1971: 6)

There is no doubt that the spectacle is a space, whose field depends on the economic and political forces that motivate the spectacle. In other words, by controlling representations, the spectacle could reach into every space if left unchecked.

1.2. THE SITUATIONS

Debord had little regard for political and economic oppression, and he proposed the use of situations to free oneself from the spectacle:

Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiences of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality. We must develop a systematic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviors which that environment gives rise to and which radically transform it. (Debord, 1957/2006: 38)

There is no roadmap for creating situations: Situationists recommend the «use of all arts and techniques as means contributing to the composition of a unified milieu» (Debord, 1957/2006: 38) and indeed their work was just incipient when Debord gained his notoriety. The map of the *Naked City*, whose name is inspired by a movie which was inspired by a book, is but a glimpse of how rich situations may be. By and large, creating situations is characterized as a playful activity, an uninhibited activity that comes first and foremost from the association of individuals with no ulterior motives. During that same era, Clifford Geertz would embrace an approach of «deep play» for ethnographic methods (Geertz, 1973), which he used to make sense of the «theatre state» of politics (Geertz, 1980). Along the same lines, Nigel Thrift also considered play as a «process of performative experiment» (Thrift, 1997: 145).

Supported and likely energized by a phenomenological renaissance in his intellectual milieu (that is, rubbing elbows with Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Barthes, Ricoeur, and Levinas), Debord advances situations as purposeful yet inadvertent battering rams that sharpen the senses against the dull edges of spectacle. In fact, Debord borrowed the lexeme of «situations» from Sartre:

Thus the empirical and practical concept of freedom is wholly negative; it issues from the consideration of a situation and establishes that this situation leaves me free to pursue this or that end. One might say even that this situation conditions my freedom in this sense, that the situation is there in order not to constrain me. Remove the prohibition to circulate in the streets after the curfew, and what meaning can there be for me to have the freedom (which, for example, has been conferred on me by a pass) to take a walk at night? (Sartre, 1993: 486)

In the same way Tuan argued for egocentrism which compels one «to acknowledge that he stands at the periphery of another's world» (Tuan, 1971: 185) lest they

succumb to the soporific inner nature, Debord supports an awakening against «the very principle of the spectacle — nonintervention — is linked to the alienation of the old world.» (Debord, 1957: 40)

Language plays an important role in mediating the images of spectacle, since it contains the totality of our symbolic systems, but it has also been co-opted by the same economic processes that have warped urban space. The same observation also appeared more recently:

The world can be reimagined in ways that break with capitalist modalities, and simply because we have become content to speak with the forked tongue of consumerism, individualism, and materialism does not mean this is the only language we can learn. (Springer, 2016: 12)

Pre-figuring the call of anarchist geography, situations are the emancipatory space of experience, where the free may enjoy freedom.

Speaking of «cities» and «neighborhoods» assumes that we subscribe to the same arbitrary registration system as those who built them, creating containment units roped in red tape. Some may require international travel to lose their sense of place; Debord, on the contrary, recommends diving inward.

For instance: less than 200 years ago, the Gabrieleño (Tongva) were foragers on the California coast, which came to be occupied by the Mexican Empire under the name Rancho La Tajauta, then granted to the California Colony of Indiana Hoosiers, then distributed amongst 27 homesteaders including Charles Watts, whose widow sold the land to a Pacific Electric power house which provided the train stop around which the city of Watts developed. From a hamlet, Watts became attached to the neighboring city of Compton, then separated from it, then voted to be incorporated in the city of Los Angeles in 1926 (Ray, 1985). Several years later, it became a primarily African American but still diverse neighborhood of South-Central Los Angeles (Avila, 2004). As gentrification replaced segregation, the Watts neighborhood is a misshapen part of the South Los Angeles area (as it is now known) which remains patrolled by White police officers who are especially protective of international touristic activity around Watts Towers, and certainly not the Gabrieleño-Tongva who have been erased and dispossessed from their home.

In 1965, the Watts rebellion exposed the cracks in Los Angeles' spectacular armor during the New Hollywood era. Early situationist writings had mentioned futuristic possibilities for cities in the sixties, such as «one-man helicopters» (Debord, 1959/2006: 70) and ultralightweight and insulated elevated public infrastructure (Constant, 1959/2006: 71). But they also mention armed conflict (Situationist International, 1961) which unfortunately became a lot more common than the alternatives. Debord would later in life invent a board game (accompanied by a book and a movie) devised to both distract from the spectacle and engage its players in power struggle (Debord, 1991). He appreciated the events in Watts as much as he supported the concurrent civil war in Algeria for the revolts' glaring disregard for hierarchy and their unabated focus on experiential autonomy. Debord considered that the economic consequences of these conflicts came last.

As he saw it, these fights were a truly existential need for protesters: «[they] cannot set themselves any lesser task if [they] wish to be recognized and to recognize [themselves] in their own world.» (Debord, 1971: 179) Situations were supposed to free the individuals from the spectacle, but the acceleration of capitalism in the second half of the twentieth century has made freedom a monumental task that easily turns into a spectacle of freedom.

2. CONFLICT

On August 11, 1965, a traffic stop by the Los Angeles Police Department became the site of a scuffle between an African American family and law enforcement. The allegations of reckless driving became a danger to the public when the suspect's mother scolded him, and police officers attempted to subdue the family using batons and firearms, injuring bystanders in the process. Guy Debord summarized the situation retrospectively:

An incident between highway patrol and passers-by turned into two days of spontaneous riots. Increasing numbers of law enforcement personnel were unable to regain control of the street. Around the third day, African Americans went back in the fray, looting surrounding gun shops, even managing to shoot at police helicopters. Thousands of soldiers and police officers – the military strength of an infantry division with tank support – had to be thrown into battle to contain the revolt to the Watts neighborhood, then to recover control over the course of numerous street fights, spanning several days, the insurgents proceeded to systematically pillaging the stores, and setting them on fire. (Debord, 1965/2006: 194-195, my translation)

The Watts Rebellion was one of several large-scale clashes between United States (US) citizens and armed forces, often classified as «race riots» because citizens were typically People of Color and law enforcement were white. However, they were not clashing directly over issues of race: each of these incidents started because of minor infractions that escalated due to police intervention: in the summer of 1964 alone, similar clashes erupted in New York City, Rochester, Jersey City, Paterson, Elizabeth, Chicago and Philadelphia. And more would follow.

A commission spearheaded by former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency John McCone found that the root causes of the Watts Rebellion were high unemployment, lack of education, and «resentment, even hatred, of the police, as the symbol of authority.» (McCone, 1965) In other words, race was only one factor in a much larger political and economic context that accelerated tensions between the populace and other ranks of social hierarchy.

Debord had a similar assessment, which he tied to capitalist exploitation as he looked back to the Birmingham movement in his analysis. Following fifteen years of unsolved bombings in African American communities, several weeks of peaceful protests resulted in the city shutting down for business. Eventually, city leaders agreed to economic and education reforms, the protesters dissipated; and the bombing campaigns resumed just a few weeks later. Debord advanced that:

The basic data is that the civil rights movement, in its embrace of legal means, presented only a legal challenge. Employing legal recourse in law is logical. However, it is irrational to scrounge for law in the face of blatant illegality, as if it were an anomaly that might vanish once someone points it out. The superficial illegality, conspicuously visible, still applied to African Americans in many states, manifestly has its roots in a socio-economic contradiction which is outside of the scope of existing laws; and no future judicial law could undo the same, faced with the more fundamental laws of society, of which Black Americans are finally daring ask to partake. (Debord, 1965/2006: 196, my translation)

This conflict reflects the antagonism of two co-extant spaces: on the one hand, the social space in which African Americans and white Americans, by all accounts, are all equally free. On the other hand, the socio-economic space in which African Americans are restricted in movement, manifested through property laws, rules of orderly conduct, and even suffrage. In 1965, the two collided with one another in the streets of Los Angeles. To be sure, these laws have changed since 1964; in fact, riots in Harlem started the same day Lyndon B. Johnson enacted the Civil Rights Act. But Debord explained that the legal proceedings are only the «conspicuous,» or discursive device employed in the spectacle, and the law only guarantees certain freedoms to certain people at certain times. By contrast, Debord was an advocate of unqualified freedom.

3. FREEDOM IN THE SPECTACLE

As an introduction to the chapter on territorial domination, Debord (who was very fond of strategic positioning) used an epigraph from Machiavelli's *The Prince*:

«To those who become Lords of a city that is accustomed to living free without destroy it, they can expect to be destroyed by it.[...] No matter what you do to it or what you provide for it, short of expelling or dispersing its inhabitants, they will never forget [Freedom] or their customs» (Debord 1971)

This observation contains a double warning: to the colonizers, that imposing a new spatial grid on an existing space is a tall order which requires annihilating the existing space (law enforcement achieve that goal with riot control agents which assault the sensory system, such as rubber bullets, Long Range Acoustic Devices and tear gas). To those attempting to decolonize, that the spectacle will not stop until it has achieved victory over everything. The contradiction between these two positions contains the essence of Debord's dialectic.

The efforts toward territorial domination in the sixteenth century have led to the ubiquitous presence of European power across the world. Indigenous populations fell victim to the whims of monarchs, whether they were chased out of their homelands, forcibly assimilated, enslaved, or outright killed. In other words, the pre-capitalist world of Machiavelli was the macroscopic basis for the micromanaging behavior of capitalist owners. During this time, the practice of slavery

entered a new era, when Pope Nicholas V agreed that non-Christians could be freely enslaved; under this doctrine, every non-European had become a commodity. This is a veritable ontological break, marking a boundary between people and non-people.

Even when European leaders recognized the moral wrongs of slavery, in America the economic value of slavery often outweighed moral principles (so much so that slaves could be converted to Christianity and yet remain in bondage). Under capitalism, this boundary became cemented: the condition of slavery was allowed to transcend time and space, the United States Supreme Court even characterized it as a «perpetual and impassable barrier» (*Dred Scott v. Sandford*). Freedom has undeniably remained a desirable value for US American society, shrouded in copper in the Port of New York, sung at sporting events, recited in Congress and Public Schools. But its value being tied to economic performance has continued the ontological differentiation from the colonization era: depending on your value system, freedom might be a commodity.

3.1. PURVEYING FREEDOM

One of the features of the spectacle is its glorification of busy-ness to the detriment of freedom: «There can be no freedom outside of activity, and in the context of spectacle all activity is denied, just as real activity has been fully redirected to the global contriving of that end.» (Debord, 1971: 27) In Debord's view, the spectacle commodifies freedom: outside of home and work, one is only allowed to exercise a culturally approved freedom within certain third spaces (see *supra*), which can only be afforded through work. I should note that this analysis transpires equal parts Marxism and anthropological theories of economy contemporary to Situationism: «Where choice enters so that the satisfactions derived are to be maximized, the free good becomes an economic one.» (Herskovits, 1952: 5) In a capitalist economy, work and freedom are regimented so that one can only enjoy as much freedom as required to maintain productivity.

When the COVID-19 pandemic grew in the United States, local polities adopted a variety of prophylactic measures to limit the spread of the virus. This caused a general slowdown of the US economy and many businesses to close temporarily. Very soon, an insurrection mounted: in Ohio a group of protesters, some armed with rifles, waved signs in front of the State House with the slogan «Freedom is essential» (Rosenberg, 2020). The following week, another group in Michigan, also armed with rifles, sought to create a traffic jam around the State house, also bearing signs with the inscription «My Freedom is Essential.» (Hutchinson, 2020). A few days later a group of Minnesotans gathered under the banner «Live Free Minnesota» in front of the state Governor's house; among their signs, the phrase «freedom is essential» (Schuman, 2020).

Because the safety measures carved an exceptional status for «essential businesses,» they claimed that freedom was also essential business: some wanted their commercial activity to continue; others wanted to enjoy the benefits of these same commercial activities. Many probably also worried about their country's business in the process: without its economy, the US would not be able to ensure

its world dominance. This is part of a larger trend in the twenty-first century United States exemplified by the FreedomWorks organization («Lower Taxes, Less Government, More Freedom»), who are coordinating similar events to end COVID-related restrictions. In all cases, those who do business emphasize the direct relationship between profit and the freedoms that the spectacle graciously provides.

Of course, it is only offering a fantasy of freedom: a performance, expressed and adjudicated piecemeal, which ensures the end survival of capitalism. They brandish ready-made commodities as so many reminders of their dependence on the system that created them. Correspondingly, there was little police repression of these events which presented no threat to the *status quo*. Even the President of the United States caught wind of these slogans and eagerly reiterated the spectacle to his international audience, thereby ensuring they would remain completely vacuous.

Our contemporaries might use the word «meme» to describe this phenomenon: «a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.» (Dawkins, 1976). Today, memes are a heavily commodified language, symptomatic of a «spectacular consumption (here the cars and gadgets, there the words of the venerated leader)» (Situationist International, 1965). The spectacle is «the *free space of commodities* [...] at all times modified and redesigned [...] in order to become ever more identical to itself, and as close as possible to motionless monotony.» (Debord, 1971: 166)

Authority figures are typically avatars of law and order, i.e. limited personal freedoms, but there are no opposing sides within the spectacle. Debord had made this very observation toward the end of his career:

Formerly one only conspired against an established order. Today, conspiring in its favor is a new and flourishing profession. Under spectacular domination, people conspire to maintain it, and to guarantee what it alone would call its well-being. This conspiracy is a part of its very functioning. (Debord, 1990: 74)

In a truly spectacular turn of events, one conspiracy has neither replaced nor supplanted the other. On the contrary, the conspirators have created a trove of «exposés» folding the health emergency into existing conspiracies, variously charging philanthropists with a secret agenda to monitor the population and foreigners with the creation of the virus (Lynas, 2020). From the point of view of the spectacle, the biggest danger is the ontological other, which is anyone who does not subscribe to the spectacle.

The difference between the spectacle and situations is another difference of ontologies. The spectacle provides highly calculated choreographies associated with a measure of comfort, whereas situations reflect the mathematical chaos of existence, with sometimes uncomfortable moments. As a result, freedom in the spectacle is a factor of spectacle maintaining itself, by contrast with unexpected perhaps uncontrollable situations (looting, arson, and poetry). In their service to a space that selectively includes and excludes, police officers are in fact guarding an ontological spatial boundary.

3.2. LAW & DISORDER

On Monday May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, had died of asphyxiation under the sustained weight of an officer from the Minneapolis Police Department. Hundreds of people would gather in his remembrance that day, and thousands more followed. Around the third day, community organizers established the South Minneapolis Mutual Aid Autonomous Zone to coordinate the input and output of supplies between various areas of town and those protesting or affected by the protest. Their primary tools are maps of where supplies are needed, and where to procure them (TCMAP, 2020), reconfiguring exchanges using barter systems and gift economies. They did not cause much disorder, in the sense that everyday life could continue unabated, but they fundamentally changed the rules of social engagement for protesters.

In the following days, thousands more would take to the streets across the United States and the world to demand accountability from law enforcement. On Monday June 8, Seattle Police Department (SPD) was reportedly vacating the East Precinct building. The East Precinct of Seattle covers the populous Capitol Hill neighborhood and Cal Anderson municipal park. Anticipating protests, the preceding weekend, SPD had established a series of barricades to control the crowd. The barricade on the western side of Cal Anderson Park had become a place of high tension between law enforcement and protesters. After the building was boarded up, there would be no clashes between protesters and law enforcement for the first time in several days. The area became known as the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ), whose defining elements were no police and a lot of foot traffic to-and-from a community garden, free libraries, various small food stands, or public art (Bush, 2020).



THURSDAY AFTERNOON IN THE CHAZ (SCREEN CAPTURE FROM HTTP://CAPHILLAUTO.ZONE)

On Monday June 22, following weeks of demonstrations and Washington, DC's mayor renaming part of 16th Street NW across the White House to Black Lives Matter Plaza, police retreated from the area and protesters declared it the Black House Autonomous Zone (Nirrapil, 2020). At first glance, there are many similarities

between these events and those mentioned *supra*, with one notable difference: the autonomous zones have lasted longer than a couple of hours. In each case, the ceaseless protest grew into larger, more permanent fixtures, which law enforcement tried hard to suppress, but could no longer supervise for organizational reasons.

By and large, the CHAZ has received the most attention, likely because of its large territorial and demographic footprint. The same President of the United States who just a few weeks earlier sought to liberate other parts of the country, now worried about a takeover of the city. Ignoring the fact that protesters spontaneously associated with one another to create this space, conservative observers pondered, «who in Seattle voted to cede their neighborhood to armed vigilantes?» (Rove, 2020) as many others sought to characterize the space in terms of another spectacle: «movie mayhem come alive,» they proclaimed (Chumley, 2020). It is important for the spectacle to characterize these situations in spectacular ways: if they cannot control life in these areas, at least they can control their representations.

There is certainly something flashy about declaring yourself autonomous. The name itself has a militaristic undertone (the same was used in Iraqi Kurdistan or some Palestinian settlements), and although the various *loci* noted here did not directly acknowledge it³, they almost certainly draw their inspiration from Hakim Bey's concept of Temporary Autonomous Zones. It is a *détournement* of the strategic concept, described by its author as:

[no] more than an essay («attempt»), a suggestion, almost a poetic fancy. [...] I am not trying to construct political dogma. In fact I have deliberately refrained from defining the TAZ — I circle around the subject, firing off exploratory beams. In the end the TAZ is almost self-explanatory. If the phrase became current it would be understood without difficulty...understood in action. (Bey, 2003: 97)

The echoes of Debord in this concept are unmistakable, and they have been noted previously (Sellars, 2010). Even more particularly, closing the roads to automobile traffic is a tenet to the situations: «We must replace travel as an adjunct to work with travel as a pleasure.» (Debord, 1959: 70)

But Bey's *temporary* autonomous zones are not designed to last; and though none of these autonomous zones have claimed to be temporary, they are embedded in city centers rife with private interest for whom the rules of capitalism have not been suspended. All signs point to the fact that their lifespan will expire; in fact, the CHAZ was later renamed Capitol Hill Occupied Protest, marking a new era in the space's existence (King & Shepard, 2020) before its eventual disappearance. Another chapter in this quest for freedom is «Occupy City Hall» in New York City (Kim, 2020) and St. Louis (Curtis, 2020), a reminder of the Occupy movement of 2011 whose ensign had seemingly dwindled in the interim. Smaller «occupy» events intervened in municipal councils in Syracuse, NY, Memphis, TN, Norman, OK, and

^{3.} Bey has expressed himself in favor of pederasty and against abortion, rendering him a persona non grata in progressive circles.

Protesters in St Louis were dispersed after a few days, while in New York the protest became a transient encampment nicknamed Abolition Park (Feuer & Kim, 2020).

Using the vocabulary of army maneuvers and colonization, albeit a subversion of the spectacle's *modus operandi*, inevitably elicited anxiety in spectacular spheres. But their physical existence remains at the mercy of armed soldiers and heavy-duty machinery. If nothing else, they have become symbols of the larger power struggle against the spectacle, and they might serve as a rally point for future like-minded protests.

4. IS IT A NEW SITUATION, OR A NEW SPECTACLE?

By Debord's standards, and many Marxisms', a time-limited protest would hardly be sufficient to effect real change if they focus on simply reproducing imperialist devices. But what we are witnessing is neither a Situationist nor a Marxist protest: it is a spontaneous display of power, possibly inspired in part by both, and more importantly claiming its own stake in a larger radical struggle. For that matter, a call to self-examination in the Situationist address to Algeria resounds saliently: «The next revolutions are confronted with the task of understanding *themselves*.» (Situationist International, 1965) Those exhibiting their sense of independence and their own will to power in 2020 have a responsibility to themselves first and foremost.

Therein lies the most important aspect of current events: it shows a possibility of new spaces for posterity. In order to be successful, protesters must care enough about their situation to maintain the integrity of their praxis and defeat entropy, lest it might be coopted by more spectacular forms and become inert. There are many tools the spectacle will deploy to do so: first and foremost, law enforcement continues to exert a violent distortion of humans into prefabricated shapes. Equally as important, the role of the media, including social media, which represents a skewed perspective and are thus better suited for spectacle.

In some cases, with issues that threaten to become controversial, another pseudo-critique can be created; and between the two opinions which will thus be put forward-both outside the impoverished conventions of the spectacle-unsophisticated judgment can oscillate indefinitely, while discussion around them can be renewed whenever necessary. (Debord, 1990: 75)

The free press, whose freedom is granted by the same apparatus that restricts other freedoms, and whose material existence depends on the same apparatus that other material existences, has no vested interest in social change. Debord pointed out in 1965 that the material losses incurred in the Watts riots were a mere collateral of the rebellion: «Deeper than the indignity of having to depend on the police officer, Black [Americans] are rejecting the indignity of having to depend on commodities.» (Debord, 1965/2006: 198, my translation)

That is not to say that looting and arson are an inevitable part of any protest, especially where the insurance industry can replace commodities at the stroke of a pen. Lest we forget, Debord's prime directive is free (costless) poetry. But legal

changes, in their emphasis of fairness, will usually materialize in a compromise and mixed results. Since the spectacle reflects unfettered production, any victory over it should translate into economic change: spaces that regain control over exchanges and consumption are an excellent start.

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AÑO 2020 ISSN: 1130-2968 E-ISSN 2340-146X





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