Introduction

In the following pages I do not attempt to supply any new evidence in support of or formulate any new theory or explanation of the three conspiratorial situations that I discuss—although I do provide what I feel to be the least implausible accounts of these events self-consciously understood as ‘conspiracies’. I also do not undertake a thorough discussion of the nature and function of what is often dismissively referred to as ‘conspiracy theory’ within contemporary political and popular culture; the subject matter is vast (seemingly even greater than the substantive content of the manifold conspiracy theories themselves) and would require a separate book (probably redundant by now) to treat the topic adequately. Nor, finally, am I offering an argument for the objective rightness of any particular form of critical theory or research methodology; if my tone is at times polemical or didactic, this is simply the by-product of the close reading that I am undertaking of certain historical fragments that have managed to reach the public domain using the lenses of one particular school of radical thought—Situationism.

My purpose here is much narrower and wholly consistent with my purposes elsewhere: to demonstrate the practical usefulness of a number of critical theorists to
the discipline of radical criminology whose work has, for whatever reasons, been largely underappreciated by those in the field. The subject of this monograph is the late writings of Guy Debord (1931-94), the ostensible founder and moving spirit (or, more precisely, the permanent general secretary) of the more than normally anomalous form of French critical theory known as Situationism, which lasted as a formal movement from 1957 to 1972.\(^1\) Perhaps most accurately described as a neo-avant-gardist crypto-Dadist anti-Surrealist direct political action group,\(^2\) Situationism, not surprisingly, fetishized the notion of the ‘situation’, a philosophically elaborate and poetically reified hybrid of street theatre and political combat.

Our central purpose is the construction of situations, that is, the concrete construction of temporary settings of life and their transformation into a higher, passionate nature. We must develop intervention directed by the complicated factors of two great components in perpetual interaction: the material setting of life and the behaviors that it incites and that overturn it.\(^3\)

Situationism is best understood not as an intellectual product of duration but as a glossary of terms, virtually all of which were derived from Surrealism: *dérive*, a sort of ‘free flowing stream’ of political consciousness; *dé-

\(^1\) Although Situationism is frequently reduced to the work of Debord, the general consensus is that the first recognizably Situationist text is ‘Formulary for a New Urbanism’, written by Ivan Chtcheglov in 1953. See Chtcheglov generally.

\(^2\) One of the reasons why Situationism is so difficult to define is that during its life span Debord managed to expel virtually every other member from the group. Apart from Debord, the most important Situationists were Asger Jorn (1914-73) and Raoul Veneigem (b. 1934). See generally Wark.

\(^3\) Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations’, 44.
tournement (‘literary communism’), the freewheeling appropriation of any and all cultural materials at hand as a form of ‘collective property’; psycho-geography, the “study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals”; and unitary urbanism, the subordination of all architectural forms to a radically aestheticized Humanism. But above all else, Situationism was a radical protest movement, in both abstract word and physical action, against the original sin of Modernity: boredom.

Our action on deportment, in connection with other desirable aspects of a revolution in custom, can be defined summarily as the invention of a new species of games. The most general aim must be to broaden the non-mediocre portion of life, to reduce its empty movements as much as possible.

The situation is ludic in essence, and, via the performative magic of both dérive and détournement, is to be directly realized through those forms of cultural materials most appropriate to it—film, photography, posters, graffiti (‘Ne travaillez jamais’), comic books, and ‘scandalous’ speech. The paradox at work here is obvious: in order to negate the twin forms of modern (-ist) alienation—boredom and commodification—the situation must unconsciously replicate the cultural logic of entertainment, the very disease that the poetry-in-the-streets is attempting to cathetically purge. But it is also the case—and not only in Sicily—that the very best of all tactics is ‘to keep your friends close and your enemies

4 Wark, 62.
5 Ford, 34.
6 Wark, 68.
closer’. And the arch-enemy, or Other, of the situation, as Debord brilliantly explicated near the end of the Situationist moment, is the *spectacle*, ‘a sort of diplomatic representative of hierarchical society at its own court, and the source of the only discourse which society allows itself to hear.’ The spectacle is a congealing of the collective imagination of the masses, a totalitarian unification of the senses, the regimentation of ‘the shutters of the eyes’ (as Kafka described the cinema) sanctioned directly by the State. The situation and the spectacle are antinomies, and the future of cultural (= political) resistance in our so-called post-modern society depends solely on the way and means by which we negotiate the (post-) dialectical dance of the two mirror images.

My goal, therefore, is an extremely modest one—to argue for the richness of Situationist, and specifically Debordean, discourse for the field labor of a criminology that has become well and truly radicalized. For if it is true that ‘Generalized secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all that it displays and, in the last analysis, as its most vital component,’” then who knows what criminological garden of delight lies just beyond our sight?

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9 Debord, *Comments*, 12.