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Captive Words: Preface to a Situationist Dictionary
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it will be a bilingual dictionary, since each word has an "ideological" meaning for power and a real meaning that we think corresponds to real life in the present historical phase. Thus we will be able at each step to determine the various positions of words in the social war. If the problem of ideology is how to descend from the heaven of ideas to the real world, our dictionary will be a contribution to the elaboration of the new revolutionary theory where the problem is how to effect the transition from language to life. The real appropriation of the words that *work* cannot be realized outside the appropriation of work itself. The inauguration of free creative activity will at the same time be the inauguration of true communication, freed at last. The transparency of human relations will replace the poverty of words under the old regime of opacity. Words will not cease to *work* until people do.

Popular assumptions, due to what they conceal, work for the dominant organization of life. One such assumption is the notion that language is not dialectical, thereby implying that all use of dialectics should be rejected. But in fact nothing is more clearly subject to dialectics than language, since it is a living reality. Thus, every critique of the old world has been made in the language of that world, yet directed against it and therefore automatically in a *different* language. Every revolutionary theory has had to invent its own terms, to destroy the dominant sense of other terms and establish new meanings in the "world of meanings" corresponding to the new embryonic reality needing to be liberated from the dominant trash heap. The same reasons that prevent our adversaries (the masters of the Dictionary) from definitively fixing language enable us to assert alternative positions that negate existing meanings. But we already know that these same reasons also prevent us from proclaiming any definitive certitudes. A definition is always open, never definitive. Ours have a historical value, they are applicable during a specific period, linked to a specific historical practice.

It is impossible to get rid of a world without getting rid of the language that conceals and protects it, without laying bare its true nature. As the "social truth" of power is permanent falsification, language is its permanent guarantee and the Dictionary its universal reference. Every revolutionary praxis has felt the need for a new semantic field and for expressing a new truth; from the Encyclopédistes to the Polish intellectuals' critique of Stalinist "wooden language" in 1956, this demand has continually been asserted. Because *language is the house of power,* the refuge of its police violence. Any dialogue with power is violence, whether passively suffered or actively provoked. When power wants to avoid resorting to its material arms, it relies on language to guard the oppressive order. This collaboration is in fact the most natural expression of all power.

From words to ideas is only a step — a step always taken by power and its theorists. All theories of language, from the simple-minded mysticism of Being to the supreme (oppressive) rationality of the cybernetic machine, belong to the same world: the discourse of power considered as the sole possible frame of reference, as the universal

mediation. Just as the Christian God is the necessary mediation between two souls and between the soul and the self, the discourse of power establishes itself at the heart of all communication, becoming the necessary mediation between self and self. This is how it is able to coopt oppositional movements, diverting them onto its own terrain, infiltrating them and controlling them from within. The critique of the dominant language, the *détournement* of it, is going to become a permanent practice of the new revolutionary theory.

Since any new interpretation is called a *misinterpretation* by the *authorities,* the situationists are going to establish the legitimacy of such misinterpretation and denounce the fraudulence of the interpretations given and authorized by power. Since the dictionary is the guardian of *present* meaning, we propose to destroy it systematically. The *replacement* of the dictionary, that master reference of all inherited and domesticated language, will find its adequate expression in the revolutionary infiltration of language, in the *détournement* extensively used by Marx, systematized by Lautréamont, and now being put within everyone's reach by the SI.

Détournement, which Lautréamont called plagiarism, confirms the thesis, long demonstrated by modern art, that word are insubordinate, that it is impossible for power to *totally coopt* created meanings, to fix an existing meaning once and for all. Which means that it is objectively impossible to create a "Newspeak."[1] The new revolutionary theory cannot advance without redefining its fundamental concepts. "Ideas improve," says Lautréamont. "The meaning of words plays a role in that improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress depends on it. It sticks close to an author's phrase, exploits his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one." To salvage Marx's thought it is necessary to continually make it more precise, to correct it and reformulate it in the light of a hundred years of reinforcement of alienation and of the possibilities of negating alienation. Marx needs to be detourned by those who are

[1] Newspeak: the language imposed by the totalitarian regime in Orwell's 1984, designed to make any alternative thinking ("thoughtcrime") or speech impossible by eliminating words and phrases conveying ideas of freedom, rebellion, etc. *(Translator's note)*

possible but still absent victory, the repressed of modern history (the proletariat) and *the return of the repressed.* We propose the real liberation of language because we propose to put it into a practice free of all constraints. We reject any *authority,* linguistic or otherwise: only real life *allows* a meaning and only praxis verifies it. Debates over the reality or unreality of the meaning of a word, isolated from practice, are purely academic. We place our dictionary in that libertarian region which is still beyond the reach of power, but which is its only possible global successor.

Language remains the necessary mediation for comprehending the world of alienation (Hegel would say: the necessary alienation), the instrument of the radical theory that will eventually seize the masses because it is theirs. Only then will it find its own truth. It is thus essential that we forge our own language, the language of real life, against the ideological language of power, the terrain of justification of all the categories of the old world. From now on we must prevent the falsification or cooption of our theories. We use specific concepts already used by the specialists, but we give them a new content, turning them against the specialists that they support and against future salaried thinkers who might be tempted to besmear situationist theory with their own shit (as Claudel did with Rimbaud and Klossowski with Sade). Future revolutions must invent their own language. Concepts of radical critique will be reexamined one by one in order to rediscover their truth. The word *alienation,* for example, one of the key concepts for the comprehension of modern society, must be disinfected after having passed through the mouths of people like Axelos [editor of *Arguments*]. All words have the same relation with power as does the proletariat: they are both its present servants and the instruments and agents of future liberation from it. Poor Revel! There are no forbidden words; in language, as it will be in every other domain, *everything is permitted.* To deny ourselves the use of a word is to deny ourselves a weapon used by our adversaries.

Our dictionary will be a sort of code book enabling one to decipher the news and rend the ideological veils that cover reality. We will give possible translations that will enable people to grasp the different aspects of the society of the spectacle, and show how the slightest signs and indications contribute to maintaining it. In a sense

contradictory facts. In this way the language of the masters is everything, reality nothing, or at most the shell of this language. People are required in their acts, their thoughts and their feelings to behave as if the state was that reason, justice and freedom proclaimed by the ideology. The ritual (and the police) are there to ensure conformity to this behavior (see Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*).

The decline of radical thought considerably increases the power of words, the words of power. "Power creates nothing; it coopts" (*Internationale Situationniste* #8). Words forged by revolutionary criticism are like partisans' weapons: abandoned on the battlefield, they fall into the hands of the counterrevolution. And like prisoners of war, they are subjected to forced labor. Our most direct enemies are the proponents and established functionaries of false critique. The divorce between theory and practice provides the central basis for cooption, for the petrification of revolutionary theory into ideology, which transforms real practical demands (for whose realization the premonitory signs are already appearing in the present society) into systems of ideas, into demands of reason. The ideologues of every variety, the watchdogs of the reigning spectacle, carry out this task, emptying the content from most corrosive concepts and putting them back into circulation in the service of maintaining alienation: dadaism in reverse. They become advertising slogans (see the recent Club Med prospectus). Concepts of radical critique suffer the same fate as the proletariat: they are deprived of their history, cut off from their roots. They become grist for power's thinking machines.

Our project of liberating words is historically comparable to the Encyclopédiste enterprise. The Enlightenment's language of "tearing apart" (to continue the Hegelian image) lacked the conscious historical dimension; it was a real critique of the decrepit feudal world, but it had no idea of what would emerge from it (none of the Encyclopédistes were republicans). It was, rather, an expression of the bourgeois thinkers' own internal tearing apart. Our language aims first of all at a practice that tears the world apart, beginning with tearing apart the veils that cloak it. Whereas the Encyclopédistes sought a quantitative enumeration, the enthusiastic description of a world of objects in which the bourgeoisie and the commodity were already victorious, our dictionary will express the *qualitative,* the

continuing on this historical path, not moronically quoted by the thousand varieties of coopters. On the other hand, power's own thought is becoming in our hands a weapon against power. Ever since it came to power, the bourgeoisie has dreamed of a universal language, a language which the cyberneticians of today are trying to implement electronically. Descartes dreamed of a language (a forerunner of Newspeak) in which thought would follow thought with mathematical rigor: the *mathesis universalis* or perpetuity of bourgeois categories. The Encyclopédistes[2], dreaming (under feudal power) of "definitions so rigorous that tyranny could not tolerate them," paved the way for an eternal future power that would be the ultimate goal of history.

The insubordination of words, during the experimental phase from Rimbaud to the surrealists, has shown that the theoretical critique of the world of power is inseparable from a practice that destroys it. Power's cooption of all modern art and its transformation of it into oppressive categories of its reigning spectacle is a sad confirmation of this. "Whatever doesn't kill power is killed by it." The dadaists were the first to express their distrust in words, a distrust inseparable from the desire to "change life." Following Sade, they asserted the right to *say everything,* to liberate words and "replace the Alchemy of the Word with a real chemistry" (Breton). The *innocence* of words is henceforth consciously refuted and language is revealed as "the worst of conventions," something that should be destroyed, demystified, liberated. Dada's contemporaries did not fail to stress its will to destroy everything, the danger it represented to the dominant sense. (Gide uneasily referred to it as a "demolition job.") After Dada it has become impossible to believe that a word is forever bound to an idea. Dada realized all the possibilities of language and forever closed the door on art as a specialty; it posed once and for all the problem of the realization of art. Surrealism was of value only insofar as it continued and extended this project; in its literary productions it was

[2] Encyclopedistes: Diderot, d'Alembert, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire and other eighteenth-century French thinkers who promoted the advancement of science and secular thought, encouraged reason, knowledge, education and tolerance as a way of overcoming ignorance and superstition, and contributed to the Encyclopedie (1751–1780). *(Translator's note)*

reactionary. The realization of art — poetry in the situationist sense — means that one cannot realize oneself in a "work," but rather realizes oneself, period. Sade's inauguration of "saying everything" already implied the abolition of literature as a separate domain (where only what is literary may be said). But this abolition, consciously asserted by the dadaists after Rimbaud and Lautréamont, was not a *supersession*. There is no supersession without realization, one cannot supersede art without realizing it. In fact, there has not even been any actual abolition, since even after Joyce, Duchamp and Dada a new spectacular literature continues to thrive. This is because there can be no "saying everything" without the freedom to *do everything*. Dada had a chance for realization with the Spartakists, with the revolutionary practice of the German proletariat. The latter's failure made the failure of Dada inevitable. With its cooption (including that of virtually all its original protagonists) into subsequent artistic movements, Dada has become the literary expression of the nothingness of poetic activity, the art of expressing the nothingness of everyday freedom. The ultimate expression of this art of "saying everything" deprived of any doing is the blank page. Modern poetry (experimental, permutational, spatialist, surrealist or neodadaist) is the antithesis of poetry, it is the artistic project coopted by power. It abolishes poetry without realizing it, living off its own continual self-destruction. "What's the point of saving language," Max Bense asks resignedly, "when there is no longer anything to say?" Confession of a specialist! Muteness or mindless chatter are the sole alternatives of the specialists of permutation. Modern thought and art, guaranteeing power and guaranteed by it, move in the realm of what Hegel called "the language of flattery." Both contribute to the eulogy of power and its products, perfecting reification while banalizing it. Asserting that "reality consists of language" or that "language can only be considered in and for itself," the specialists of language arrive at the concepts of "language-object" and "word-thing" and revel in the panegyrics of their own reification. The thing becomes the dominant model and once again the commodity finds its realization and its poets. The theory of the state, of the economy, of law, of philosophy, of art — everything now has this apologetic character.

Whenever separate power replaces the autonomous action of the masses, whenever bureaucracy seizes control of all aspects of social life, it attacks language and reduces its poetry to the vulgar prose of its information. Bureaucracy appropriates language for its own use, just as it does everything else, and imposes it on the masses. Language — the material support of its ideology — is then presumed to communicate its messages and reflect its thought. Bureaucracy represses the fact that language is first of all a means of communication between people. Since all communication is channeled through bureaucracies, people no longer even need to talk to each other: their first duty is to play their role as *receivers* in the network of informationist communication to which the whole society is reduced, receivers of orders they must carry out.

This language's mode of existence is bureaucracy, its becoming is bureaucratization. The Bolshevik order born out of the failure of the soviet volution imposed a whole series of more or less magical and impersonal expressions in the image of the bureaucracy in power. "Politburo," "Comintern," "Cavarmy," "Agitprop" — mysterious names of specialized agencies that really are mysterious, operating in the nebulous sphere of the state (or of the Party leadership) without any relation to the masses except insofar as they reinforce their subjection. Language colonized by bureaucracy is reduced to a series of blunt, inflexible formulas in which the same nouns are always accompanied by the same adjectives and participles. The noun governs; each time it appears the other words automatically fall in around it in the correct order. This "regimentation" of words reflects a more profound militarization of the whole society, its division into two basic categories: the caste of rulers and the great mass of people who carry out their orders. But the same words are also called on to play other roles, invested with the magic power to reinforce the oppressive reality, to cloak it and present it as the only possible truth. Thus there are no more "Trotskyists" but only "Hitlero-Trotskyists"; one never hears of Marxism but only of "Marxism-Leninism," and the opposition is automatically "reactionary" in the "Soviet regime." The rigidity with which these ritualistic formulas are sanctified is aimed at preserving the purity of this "substance" in the face of obviously