

THE OCCULTED STATE

McKenzie Wark

- + A woman with two small children tries to board a plane at Ronald Reagan airport. Security stop her when they discover that the child's sippy cup contains more than the permissible three ounces of liquid. At once, uniformed agents gather, superiors are notified. The boarding grinds to a halt. The child's sippy cup becomes an object of extreme suspicion. It is as if the greatest power ever to bestride the world could be brought low by the most modest formula.¹ As Gianfranco Sanguinetti once wrote: 'cowardice becomes, for the first time in history, a sublime quality, fear is always justified' (1982: 59).

What happens next is obscure, even on the security tape. Perhaps the woman throws the contents of the sippy cup on the ground. Perhaps they accidentally spill. Uniformed security guard encircle her and make her get down on her hands and knees and clean up the spilled liquid – twice. The first time she missed a bit. Shortly after, the authorities revoke the ban on liquids, describing it as an ineffective piece of *security theatre*. It is all in the name of the *war on terror*. A war which, as Vice President Dick Cheney once casually mentioned, can never end. Given that these were times when, during a hunting expedition, Cheney shot a friend in the face, and it was *the friend* who thought he should apologise, then naked displays of pure power legitimated by nothing much more than their own renown were the norm. The state of emergency, or the state of exception, is revealed once again to be merely the normal state of affairs.

That the state is founded on something other than justice, law or the social contract would hardly surprise the Situationists. As Guy Debord writes to fellow founding member Pinot Gallizio in 1958:

‘Yesterday the police interrogated me for a long time concerning the journal and the Situationist organization. This is only the beginning. One of the threatening principles that appeared quite quickly to me in this discussion: the police want to consider the Situationist International as an association dedicated to bringing disorder to France.’ (2008)²

Ever since he moved to Paris in 1950, Debord came into contact with the state mostly via its police. He did not work for any state media or cultural agency. He was not involved in the antics of its political parties. In his experience, the state was the police.

After the assassination of his friend and patron Gerard Lebovici in 1984, certain journalists took a certain relish in claiming to have been privy to certain details of secret police files on Debord. They claimed that he had been under surveillance for some time. This led him to remark:

‘What a strange and unfortunate land, where one is informed of the work of an author more quickly and confidently through police archives than through the literary criticisms of a free press or through academics who make a profession out of knowing the issues at hand.’ (2001: 60)

Debord specified, in a testament of sorts, that statements he had made to the police should not be included in his collected works. Not because any statements he made to them would cause him any embarrassment, but because of literary ‘scruples about the form’ (1991b:58).

Debord admitted to using false names and documents in Italy in the 1970s, but he had his reasons. This was a time of the *strategy of tension*, in which a rising

tide of working class militancy was diverted by a shadowy game of bombings and other terrorist acts by certain secretive groups, followed by repressions and reprisals of police agencies of the state. Things reached a certain peak in 1978 when the Red Brigades kidnapped Aldo Moro, who had twice been Prime Minister and was the architect of the so-called *historic compromise* which was supposed to bring the left into the government. Moro’s body was found dead in a car parked mid way between the offices of the Communist Party and that of his own Christian Democrats. The right blamed the Communists for the Red Brigades. The Communists blamed the far-left Autonomists. The Autonomists blamed each other.

Debord thought he saw the hand of the state in these murky events. He encouraged his young friend Gianfranco Sanguinetti to expose it:

‘I have known a man who spent his time among the party girls of Florence and who loved to keep bad company with all of the hard-drinkers of the bad neighborhoods. But he comprehended everything that went on. He demonstrated his comprehension once. One knows that he will do it again. He is, today, considered by some to be the most dangerous man in Italy.’ (2004)³

Sanguinetti had, with Debord’s assistance, pulled off a brilliant hoax in 1975, and Debord encouraged him to act again. Sanguinetti did not initially credit Debord’s theory of secret police involvement in the Moro affair, but he came around to it. He published a short book called *Terrorism and the State* in which he wrote that: ‘It is its own secret services which organize and pull the strings of terrorism. Is this not, then, the main secret of the Italian State?’ (1982: 14-15) This was an extraordinary thesis at the time, and it got Sanguinetti into even more trouble. It retrospect it doesn’t seem all that far fetched. A war on terror – led by a general no less – aided the consolidation of a state in crisis. The big losers in Sanguinetti’s account were the Autonomist left. Both the state and its official enemy, the Communist party, were united in condemning the Autonomists for sympathy, if not complicity, with the armed struggle, pushing

the Autonomists onto the defensive.

‘The poor Autonomists, who, for their part, never had much of a clue either about terrorism or about revolution, have thus ended up, like a coveted prey, in the game-bag of the Stalinists and the judiciary.’ (1982: 19)

Sanguinetti’s analysis of terrorism, while salutary, is nevertheless somewhat unsatisfactory. His identification of terror directly with the state feeds into a conspiratorial approach to thinking about state power, as if by uncovering the secret machinations of the state one could somehow apprehend its truth. Something like this was the aim of the 500 people who gathered at the Embassy Suites hotel in Chicago for a combination trade show and political convention for the 9/11 Truth movement. Given that Zogby polls show 42% of Americans doubting the conclusions of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, and 49% of New Yorkers believing that some leaders ‘knew in advance’ about the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, they are not alone. The Truthers are out there. In his keynote address, syndicated radio host Alex Jones rehearsed the main argument of the movement, that on September 9th 2001, it was ‘controlled demolition’ that brought down the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, not the impact of hijacked passenger jets.⁴ This is the central tenet of the 9/11 Truth ideology. To them it seems more plausible than imagining that, where 9/11 is concerned, the state has nothing to hide.

Sanguinetti distinguishes between offensive terrorism by non-state actors and defensive terrorism by the state. He judged Italian terrorism of the period to be defensive terrorism on the part of the state. This refreshing claim can be turned aside from the path of conspiracy theory and used for new tactics in thinking through the inscrutable surface effects of power at work. Perhaps the origins of terrorism are not so easily decided. Perhaps the origins are not even all that relevant. Perhaps the state can make use of what appears to be offensive terrorism coming from a non-state actor, as a way to consolidate power and preempt social movements. As the rather more sanguine Debord remarks: ‘Such

a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. It wishes to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results.’ (1990: 24) The state that makes a spectacle of responding to a need for security need not answer to any other desires.

In the disintegrating spectacle of the twenty-first century, truth is as strange as fiction. In his novel *Spook Country*, William Gibson writes of a *cold civil war*, all but invisible, waged within a state of Byzantine complexity and obscurity (2007: 74). His elaborate spy plot includes the usual agents and counter agents, but curiously enough mixes in the owner of an advertising agency with the improbable name of Hubertus Bigend. The son of a minor Situationist, Bigend has grasped that the secret is to the spectacle as art once was to culture. The secret is not the truth of the spectacle, it is the aesthetic form of the spectacle. Gibson intuits something central here to Situationist experience, if not its theory: that the spectacle of appearances has another side. That which is good appears; that which does not appear is better.

What is secret is not the truth of the spectacle. The division between the spectacle of appearances and the secrecy of non-appearances is itself an aspect of the falsification of the whole that the spectacle affects. While the spectacle renders all that appears equivalent, the division between the secret and the spectacular implies a hierarchy – the first principle of power. Appearances are exchangeable for appearances; secrets exchangeable only for secrets. For Debord and Sanguinetti, it is not knowledge which is power, but secrecy. A counter-power is then not so much a counter-knowledge as a strategy that is capable of both revealing secrets when it is tactically advantageous, but also of creating them. Against the power of the secret as the founding power of the state, the Situationists and post-Situationists alike pose the glamour of the clandestine as a kind of counter-power. The refusal to appear within the spectacle is also a refusal of the division between the spectacular and its secret. Which in turn makes the Situationists (and certain ex-Situationists) appear as dangerous to the state. The paradox is that this apparent danger, while only apparent, becomes in

spectacular society a real danger.

Another Hotel Room: this time the Budapest Hilton, and this time the organiser is the International Republican Institute, a nongovernmental group which may or may not be in receipt of American government money. Retired Army Colonel Robert Helvey leads a seminar on the techniques of nonviolent resistance attended by about 20 leaders of Otpor, the Serbian opposition movement.⁵ Helvey's approach is based on that of Gene Sharp, author of *From Dictatorship to Democracy* and other works, which in turn draw on the insight of Montaigne's friend Etienne de La Boétie (2004). The key to which is that if people withdraw their obedience to the state, the state cannot stand. Or as Debord says, in the same vein: 'This is how, little by little, a new epoch of fires has been set alight, which none of us alive at the moment will see the end of: obedience is dead.' (1991a: 46) And yet the outcome is far from certain. The withdrawal of consent from one state may just as easily serve another. Debord: 'Yet the highest ambition of the integrated spectacle is still to turn secret agents into revolutionaries, and revolutionaries into secret agents.' (1990: 11)

All the disintegrated spectacle might add to this transaction is that they might not even know it. There might be two ways of becoming an agent of the state. One is to be knowingly co-opted; the other is by descending into the spectacle of violence. Whether the Red Brigades were manipulated by the first method or not, they certainly became agents of the state via the second. Regardless of their allegiances and ideologies, both the secret agent and the armed revolutionary use the same forms of organisation. The state is a form of organisation: the form of hierarchy and secrecy. Sanguinetti:

'All secret terrorist groupuscles are organized and directed by a clandestine hierarchy of the very militants of clandestinity, which reflects perfectly the division of labor and roles proper to this social organization: above it is decided and below it is carried out.' (1982: 58)

Given that agents of the state invariably have much greater resources at their disposal, it is no accident who gets to infiltrate and manipulate who. But in the disintegrating spectacle, this may not even be necessary. Regardless of the inconvenience, a terrorist attack on the state provides the very pretext the state needs to consolidate its power, and in more recent times, perhaps, to go on the offensive, pre-empting popular self organisation in advance. Nothing succeeds as well as a terrorist attack in making the people feel as though they have a common enemy with the state. In the disintegrating spectacle, the state offers nothing but the spectacle of its own necessity. 'Until 1968 modern society was convinced it was loved. It has since had to abandon these dreams; it prefers to be feared.' (Debord 1990: 82)

The spectacle incorporates within itself images of its own overcoming. 'It is known that this society signs a sort of pact with its most avowed enemies, when it allots them a space in the spectacle.' (Debord 1991a: 65) It is personified by certain kinds of anti-celebrity, images of the integral action that would further disintegrate the spectacle, but which actually sustain it to the extent that they are mere images. The anti-celebrities appear as dangerous to the spectacle in spite of being useful for it, because the spectacle does not control them. They do its work for their own reasons. Since no other reasons besides the logic of spectacle are supposed to exist, their very existence is both useful and troubling. After the Lebovici assassination, Debord found himself cast as just such an anti-celebrity, who must be dangerous precisely because of his refusal of service to the spectacle.

The spectacle of communism hardly troubles the state any more. The representatives of organised labour found their place in the state. They became what they beheld. The enemy that the spectacle can recognise is, once again, as in certain times past – the terrorist. An act of terror aims above all at the production of the image. It is the spectacle for those who do not own their own news network or movie studio. It is a hijacking of the vehicle of the image itself. While terrorists appear as, and may even believe themselves to be, enemies

of the state, their role is quite different. They are the – apparently – external principle of necessity for the state. They provide it with its reason to exist. They may act of their own volition. They may be agents of another state. They may be agents of the very state they are attacking, or merely its dupes. It doesn't actually matter. They provide the state with a reason to exist, and can usually be assured of its full attention.

Certain states are less and less concerned with the well being and productivity of their subjects – their so-called *biopower*. The state of the disintegrating spectacle reveals itself as concerned mostly with its own sovereignty and the defense of property. It no longer makes any promises. For an anecdote revealing this quality of the disintegrating spectacle, consider the short story of the President and the tropical storm. When the storm breached the levees and sank a fabled southern city, the President deigned to visit and show his concern, as protocol requires. Only he did not set foot there. Rather, upon leaving his vacation home, he had his personal jet detour over the sodden earth en route back to his other house. This was in order to produce the requisite photographic opportunity, of the President looking out the window with a look of compassionate conservatism, while below private armies of goons with guns secured valuable property, and the homeless were left to make a spectacle of their own misery, fans without tickets in the stadium of the endgame.

There is a certain vanity in thinking that every aspect of our everyday life is of intimate concern to power. What if power, too, was not much more than a spectacle of appearances? Sanguinetti's greatest work did not just make an argument about the nature of power as appearance, it acted as the means by which power exposed itself in a less than flattering light. In 1975 Sanguinetti sent out a curious document to a hundred or so prominent people in Italian public life, under the pseudonym Censor. The text contained the Machiavellian argument to the effect that creating the appearance of the Communist Party joining the government does not negate the rule of bourgeois power, but could actually enhance it. The text apparently addressed itself to the real power elite,

and took a distinctive form: 'One reason we chose the ancient form of expression, the pamphlet, rather than a more systematic text, is that we do not want to renounce the pleasure of speaking with swords drawn.' (1997: 88)

Censor called for the power elite to at least attempt to be truthful amongst itself. It ought not to be duped by the specter of the power of the Communists. This was merely a phantom, which the power elite had itself invoked to strengthen the state during the cold war. But there was no need for power to believe in a phantom that was largely its own creation. The real danger was elsewhere, but before examining it, Censor expounded on the distinctive features of Italian capitalism of the seventies, features not unlike those Debord identified as the *integrated spectacle*. As a consequence of its own development, capitalism had expanded state power, which took on a nominally democratic form, but in the context of expanded secrecy and disinformation. Its principal means of dealing with conflict was to incorporate rather than repress it. Censor: 'The state is the palladium of commercial society, which converts even its enemies into proprietors.'²⁰ Development had one aspect that troubled Censor, namely that it made the economy an autonomous sphere. He offered a critique of it from the right. Left to its own devices, the autonomous development of the economy might generate the forces capable of overthrowing it. Censor called for the ruling class to think historically and politically rather than to let the economy take care of itself.

The organised labour movement, led by the Communists, were no longer the enemy. The project of post-war reconstruction had already incorporated them in a subordinate role of maintaining labour discipline, in the name of building a modern, democratic economy and society. Certain forces within the Communist party had threatened insurrection in 1948, but the party itself put down this revolt, thus confirming its allegiance to the bourgeois state. 'The Trojan horse should not be feared, except when there are well-armed Archaean troops inside.' (1997: 76) Much more damaging to the state in Censor's view was the behaviour of the Christian Democrats. He saw them principally as the party of the middle

classes who aligned their interests with the bourgeoisie. But the party was riddled with private interests who treated the various organs of the state as so many personal fiefdoms.

The main danger to the state came from neither the apparent strength of the Communists nor the unreliability of the Christian Democrats, but from a new kind of worker's movement. The working class had defected from its own party. After May '68 it could no longer be co-opted, via its leaders, with wage rises. The workers did not know what they were fighting for, but what they wanted was to fight. They had started to question private property itself – the one thing crucial to the state. 'Private property thus constitutes the fortress wall of society, and all other rights and privileges are the advanced defense.' (1997: 33) The internal weakness of the state made this movement particularly dangerous: 'on high reigns apathy, boredom and immobility; below on the contrary, political life begins to manifest feverish symptoms' (1997: 32). One such symptom was the Autonomist left, outside the Communist Party. But for Censor this was just the fever. The spontaneous action of the working class was the real disease. This was causing something of a panic among the ruling classes: 'The bourgeoisie is afraid of being right, and afraid of being afraid. It soon perceived that it was right to be afraid.' (1997: 37)

Censor stressed the usefulness of the Communist party in imposing discipline on the working class and keeping refractory elements in line. But this view was not shared by the ruling class, deluded by their own fiction which cast the Communists as the leadership of the dangerous classes against the state rather than as the police agent of the state against them. The ruling class thought the price the Communists demanded for their services outweighed the guarantees they could offer of their own effectiveness. And perhaps rightly so, as the Communists quite under-estimated the danger to themselves of rebel workers who no longer saw the unions and the Party as their representatives. And so, from 1968 on into the seventies, Italy descended into an undeclared civil war, in which 'the only things still functioning in Italy were the unions and the police'

(1997: 43).

The hot year of 1969 was the time when the possibility of a general insurrection was genuinely close. What averted it was a wave of bombings, variously attributed to anarchists or fascists, but behind at least some of which was the hand of the secret services of the state. Against this, not only the Communists but also the Autonomist left felt the need to rally around opposition to clandestine violence. But for Censor, the continued use of the terror tactic was dangerous. If the complicity of agencies of the state was to come to light, this risked alienating the very people that the strategy had neutralised, and re-establishing the conditions for worker's revolt. As Censor wryly observes: 'If no good policies have ever been founded on truth, the worst policies are founded on the improbable.' (1997: 49)

Re-founding ruling class power on firmer ground meant a more honest policy. The state had to reinstate legality or disappear. But the state couldn't count on anything but its secret services, and the continual use of force was weakening the state. Quoting Machiavelli's *Prince*, Censor argued that a state that used force too much and too often did not appear stronger for it, but weaker. And in any case, terrorism was less of a threat to the state than the mutiny of the working class. The real threat was not bombs, but as La Boétie would say, disobedience. The ruling class had discounted the threat of the working class because the new movement lacked leadership and organisation. Organised labor and Communist leadership was co-optable; *disorganised labour* was not. This was much more dangerous: 'all revolutions in history began without leaders and when they had them, they were finished' (1997: 56).

The state had to stop its short-term defensive tactics. Censor: 'our state, continually defending itself against phantom enemies – red or black according to the mood of the moment, all poorly constructed – never wanted to confront the problems posed by the real enemy' (1997: 58). The real threat was disorganised labour: 'this crisis is total because, intensively, it is life itself... that

has succumbed to the contagion' (1997: 64). It is not a crisis *in* the economy but a crisis *of* the economy. The workers gained wage rises, but were disenchanted with the flimflam that was all these wages could buy. Censor: 'we poisoned the world, and we gave the people a special reason to revolt against us every instant of their daily lives: we poisoned life itself' (1997: 66). It might still be possible to head off the danger from disorganised labor by bringing organised labour – the Communist party – more fully into the state.

This was the policy of the historic compromise, although as Censor points out it was neither historic nor a compromise. There is nothing historic about a merely expedient tactic that could later be reversed. There is no compromise when only one side – the Communists – gives anything up. On the international plane, the cold war had subsided into a period of *peaceful coexistence* between Moscow and its allies on one side and Washington and its allies on the other. For Censor this too was a mere tactic. Both sides faced troubling dissent internally. In the west, most clearly in France and Italy; in the east, the Czechs and Poles were creating their own forms of spontaneous withdrawal of obedience. This was the backdrop to Censor's support for the full incorporation of the Communists into a western state.

Censor called the ruling class to action. Power could not be delegated to others any longer. The maintenance of the state could not be entrusted to the secret police. Those who thought it better to govern with rifles than with Communists over-estimated the efficiency of rifles. Power could not be entrusted to the Christian Democrats, who were content to squabble over the spoils of each particular office and leave the state as a whole to its ruin. Power could not be left in the hands of managers, who were no better than over-paid wage earners, unable to grasp the historic process. Nor was it acceptable to cash out and leave the mess to someone else. The diffuse spectacle was undermining the very authority of the class that had created it, and was in as much trouble as the concentrated spectacle in the east. The ruling class risked being overcome by its own creation.

It simply had to be faced that capitalism had not delivered on its promises. The manufacture of abundance had led only to an abundance of boredom. The ruling class had lost sight of anything of real value. Far from securing power, abundance threatened it. Censor: 'We have thoughtlessly dispersed so much false luxury and comfort that the entire population is quite rightly dissatisfied.' (1997: 93) While the ruling class struggled against disorganised labour and its negation of property and the state, it had also the positive historical task of affirming something of value outside of mere abundance. This may be an even bigger challenge:

'this abundance of fabricated objects requires the demarcation of an elite more than ever – an elite that is sheltered by this abundance and takes what is really precious: otherwise, there will soon be no place on earth with anything precious left in it' (1997: 92).

Censor pointed the way to the seizure of initiative by the ruling class, as the seventies gave way to the eighties. Sanguinetti's pamphlet received creditable coverage in the news media, including much speculation about its author. When Sanguinetti revealed the hoax, scandal followed, but one aspect of the affair is often overlooked. Sanguinetti produced the aura of authenticity for his document by making it appear as if it were a secret that had been revealed. The secret quality of the document was what made it appear as if it had not truth, but power. So many believed that it could be what it appeared to be.

Sanguinetti's *Real Report* still works as an allegory for the relation between power and the secret in the age of the disintegrating spectacle. Unlike Censor's Christian Democrats, the Congressmen and Senators of the early twenty-first century cannot be bought; one rents them by the hour. They squabble over the particulars while the state, as the guarantor of the property interests of the ruling class, as a totality becomes nobody's business. Terror still forms a convenient alibi, if not always a terribly effective one. The major differences between the diffuse spectacle of the 1970s and the disintegrating spectacle are twofold:

Firstly, organised labour is thoroughly integrated into the state, and disorganised labour no longer even takes it as a point of reference. Secondly, the state as the centralised power over the double form of spectacle and secret gave way to a disorganised and decentralised distribution of such powers. Debord: 'the liars have lied to themselves' (1982: 2).

↳

NOTES:

1. As broadcast by *Now Public*, 14th June 2007.
2. Debord to Gallizio, 17th July 1958.
3. Debord to Sanguinetti, 21st April 1978.
4. *New York Times*, 5th June 2006.
5. *New York Times Magazine*, 26th November 2000.

REFERENCES:

- Etienne de la Boétie (2004) *The Politics of Obedience*, Whitefish MT: Kessinger Publications.
- Guy Debord (1982) *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black & Red.
- Guy Debord (1990) *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, London: Verso.
- Guy Debord (1991a) *In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni*, London: Pelagian Press.
- Guy Debord (1991b) *Panegyric*, London: Verso.
- Guy Debord (2001) *Considerations on The Assassination of Gerard Lebovici*, Los Angeles: Tam Tam Books.
- Guy Debord (2004) *Correspondance*, Tome V, Paris: Fayard.
- Guy Debord (2008) *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International*, New York: Semiotexte.
- William Gibson (2007) *Spook Country*, New York: Putnam, New York.
- Gianfranco Sanguinetti (1982) *On Terrorism and the State*, trans. Lucy Forsyth & Michel Prigent, London: B. M. Chronos.
- Gianfranco Sanguinetti (1997) *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy*, Fort Bragg CA: Flatland Books.