

Letters from 'Glaucos': the correspondence of Guy Debord during the Portuguese Revolution¹

Ricardo Noronha, IHC (NOVA FCSH)

ricardonoronha@fcsb.unl.pt

Guy Debord, founder of the Situationist International and film maker, kept a meticulous record of his correspondence between 1951 and 1994. Published by *Fayard*, the fifth volume of the correspondence includes several letters signed as 'Glaucos' (a character from the *Iliad*), addressed to Afonso Monteiro, Gianfranco Sanguinetti, Eduardo Rothe and Jaime Semprún. In those letters, Debord developed several analysis of the 'Carnation Revolution', arguing that 'the Portuguese proletariat' had gone 'further than the May 1968 movement'. Debord initially supported a local group, named *Conselho para o desenvolvimento da Revolução social*, but he would later criticize it for not taking sufficient action. He also encouraged Jaime Semprún to write *La Guerre Social au Portugal*, a book published by *Editions Champ Libre* in May 1975. This article analyses the correspondence of Debord between 1974 and 1975, offering a critical assessment of how he related to the revolutionary situation in Portugal.

¹ A preliminary version of this article was read by Tom Bunyard, Eric John-Russell and Jacqueline Reuss. I would like to thank them, along with the anonymous referees and the editors of HM, for their extremely useful comments. Evidently, none other than the authors is to be held responsible for anything that may be lacking, or incorrectly stated, in the article.

Key-Words: Carnation Revolution, Situationist International, Correspondence, Guy Debord, Strategy.

1. Introduction. A most peculiar correspondence

Even though the work of Guy Debord - founder of the Situationist International (S.I.) and author of *The Society of the Spectacle* - has long fallen under the radar of disciplines like philosophy, urban geography or cultural studies, most historiographical accounts tend to downplay the importance of his political engagement.² In *May' 68 and its aftermaths*, for instance, Kristin Ross considers that even though Debord was given to make 'megalomaniacal pronouncements about his own role' as 'instigator' of May'68, his writings had little influence in sparking the revolt, because only an elite readership had access to them.³ Gerd-Rainer Horn offers a more detailed analysis of Debord's trajectory, setting it against the backdrop of the 'colourful history and evolution of the Situationist

² The theoretical work of Guy Debord and the S.I. was the subject of a special issue of *October* (Vol.79), edited by Thomas McDonough and published in the winter of 1997. It includes an article written by two former members of the S.I.: Clark and Nicholson-Smith 1997, pp.15-31. For a quite different reading of Debord's work, see Perniola and Vasile 1999, pp. 89-101. An issue of *Grey Room* (n.52) was dedicated to Debord's cinematographic work. Cf. Smith 2013, pp.7-17; Noys 2013, pp.94-107. Also on Debord's cinema, see Agamben 2004, pp.313-19; Noys 2007, pp.395-402. For an account of the life of Guy Debord, see Marcus 1989; Ohrt and Helstadt 1999, pp.13-35; Jappe 1999; Apostolide 2015. A concise and apologetic work on the Situationist International has been written by Wark 2011.

³ Ross 2002, pp.193-94. Ross appears to have been misled by two citations taken out of context by Jappe 1999, pp. 46, 100. It is worth noting that Debord refused any role as leader and repeatedly emphasized the spontaneous nature of the May' 68 revolt, which the S.I. merely claimed to have anticipated.

International', but he also concludes that his 'direct political impact on the events of 1968 must be regarded as rather limited'.⁴

It would be enough to point out the large circulation of the pamphlet *On the poverty of student life*, written by Mustapha Khayati and largely inspired on previous texts of the S.I., to realize that the views of Ross and Reiner-Horn must be taken with a grain of salt. Indeed, such peremptory conclusions illustrate some of the limits of the interpretative tools commonly used within the discipline. By judging the impact of his actions through the angle of public notoriety, historians tend to miss out the fact that Debord - unlike, say, Daniel Cohn-Bendit (spokesman of the '22 March Movement'), Georges Séguy (leader of the *Confédération Générale du Travail*) or Jean-Paul Sartre (probably the most famous French intellectual in the second half of the Twentieth Century) - deliberately chose to remain outside of the regime of visibility he called 'the Spectacle'. The underlying motive behind Debord's writings consisted in the unity between all aspects of human existence, summarized in the notion of 'totality'. His critique of separation was also aimed at the mechanisms of alienation, hierarchy and passivity that lie at the heart of classical politics, namely the division between those who govern and those who are governed. Accordingly, he opted for a

⁴ Horn 2007, pp.8-15.

particular type of political engagement, that did not fit easily into the paradigm of either the 'militant' or the 'intellectual'.

In other words, the historical impact of Debord's actions cannot be measured by the yardstick of public notoriety. We have to look beyond his published texts and take into account what he wrote, but also what he chose to do when he wasn't writing: letters, films, *détournements*, scandals, travels, encounters, etc. We also need a more subtle understanding of 'causality', particularly in what comes to the relation between the dissemination of texts and the historical impact of ideas. This argument has been developed by Greil Marcus (1989) and Michael Löwy (1998), for whom the collective imaginary that permeated May' 68 stemmed from the subterranean influence of a bohemian radical tradition, of which Debord was one of the most notable representatives. Put simply, it was not so much that people took to the streets because they read the texts of the S.I., but rather that, once people took to the streets, the arguments laid out in those texts acquired a far-reaching significance, influencing collective action and setting the tone of the revolt.

This, of course, leaves much to say about the historical impact of Debord's political engagement, which cannot be resumed to May' 68 and its immediate aftermaths. In a thorough and rigorous study, Tom Bunyard highlighted the contribution of Debord in the field of critical

theory, but also his reflections as a revolutionary strategist, particularly after May' 68.⁵ This article offers an historiographical counterpart to Bunyard's book, centred around Debord's correspondence between April 1974 and November 1975, when the 'Carnation Revolution' was raging in Portugal. Debord kept a meticulous record of his letters, part of which was published by Fayard in an eight-volume edition. He wrote many of them with the same acute sense of historicity that characterized his later texts, such as the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* or the *Panegyric*.⁶ There is also a remarkable literary investment at play in this correspondence, as if Debord was unwilling to write even the most mundane note without displaying the formal elegance of his style. Epistolography was, it should be noted, a celebrated art within the S.I., a loosely tied network of groups and individuals scattered around the globe, who relied heavily on personal encounters, occasional phone calls and a steady stream of correspondence.

Sometimes resembling the entries of a diary, Debord's letters give us precious information about his personal trajectory after the dissolution of the S.I., in 1972, a relatively obscure period of his life.⁷

Among other things, his published correspondence reveals that he

⁵ Bunyard 2017, p. 338, 354-57. For Debord's reflections on strategy, see: Shukaitis 2014, pp. 251-68; Le Bras 2018.

⁶ Debord 1998, p.73; Debord 2004, p.5.

⁷ Unsurprisingly, his most recent biographer relies heavily on this previously unpublished material in order to describe this period. Cf. Apostolides 2015, pp. 378-389.

was greatly occupied with a wide number of issues: ensuring the screening of his film, *La Société du Spectacle*, in Paris; evaluating book proposals on behalf of *Editions Champ Libre*; planning trips to Florence; managing love affairs; making arrangements for his country holidays. Many of the letters also analyse historical events that captured his attention, offering us a glimpse of his political engagement during the 1970's.

Debord revealed particular interest in the 'Carnation Revolution', initiated in Portugal on 25 April 1974, when the oldest dictatorship in Western Europe was toppled by a movement of junior-rank officers, with the purported aim of ending the war fought on the African colonies of Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique. The quick fall of the dictatorship quickly developed into a revolutionary crisis, capturing international attention and becoming a mandatory topic of discussion amongst the radical Left.

The fifth volume of Debord's correspondence, comprising the period between January 1973 and December 1978, includes several letters signed 'Glaucos' (a fictional character from the *Iliad*, whose speech in Book 6 Debord was particularly fond of), addressed to Afonso Monteiro (a Portuguese who had lived in exile in Paris), Gianfranco Sanguinetti and Eduardo Rothe (both formerly members of the S.I.), Jacques Le Glou (an anarchist who had been involved with the

Conseil pour le Maintien des occupations [C.M.D.O.] during May '68) and Jaime Semprún (a Spaniard exiled in Paris).⁸ In those letters, Guy Debord ascribed the events that were unfolding in Portugal to a world-scale revolutionary crisis, of which May' 68 had been a precursor. Afonso Monteiro played a crucial role in this context, establishing a group named *Conselho para o desenvolvimento da Revolução social* ('Council for the development of social revolution'), to which Debord referred as 'our party in Portugal'. At a later stage, Debord eventually supported the publication, by *Editions Champ Libre*, of a book written by Jaime Semprún (*La guerre sociale au Portugal*).

In addition to offering a unique - and frequently undervalued - perspective of his everyday life, the letters also reveal an ambiguity surrounding the commitment of Debord as a revolutionary, namely when he was confronted with the practical choice of coming to Portugal. When read under the light of some of his other texts, these letters reveal a number of contradictions - that Debord could neither overcome nor fully acknowledge - between his aesthetic inclinations and his reflections as a strategist. Debord's correspondence can therefore help us to assess what he considered to be the role of 'strategy', along with his personal engagement with

⁸ Debord 2005.

a revolutionary situation that seemed to fit within the historical epoch initiated with May' 68.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. The second section analyses Debord's trajectory between the dissolution of the S.I. and the military coup of 25 April 1974. The third section covers the establishment of a 'Situationist' group in Lisbon, along with the gradual deterioration of Debord's relationship with its members. The fourth section offers an overview of the book written by Semprún, comparing it with other analysis written by authors with similar viewpoints. The concluding section sums up the main argument of the article.

2. After the S.I.: developing a theory of historical action

Judging by his correspondence, Debord spent the first months of 1974 making arrangements for the screening of his film, *La Société du Spectacle* (produced by *Simar*, a film company owned by Gerard Lebovici, who also published Debord's books through *Editions Champ Libre*) in Paris.⁹ He also found the time to collect the sums that were due to him by Rob Van Gennep, who had acquired the publishing rights of *Internationale Situationiste* (the magazine

⁹ According to the contract he proposed to Lebovici, Debord was to receive 150000 Francs for his work, along with 20 per cent of profits from the film's exhibition. Cf. Debord 2005, p.13

formerly published by the S.I.).¹⁰ It had been only two years since Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti published *The real split in the International*.¹¹ Written as the concluding piece to a long and bitter internal debate, the tract included sixty-one *Thesis on the Situationist International and its time*.¹² May '68 had, according to Debord and Sanguinetti, confirmed the main tenets of the Situationist critique of modern capitalism, but it had also rendered that critique obsolete. The victory of the S.I. was, they argued, as debatable as 'the victory that the proletarian movement' had attained 'by virtue of its renewal of the class war'.¹³ But now that its radical ideas had 'penetrated the masses', and the S.I. had fulfilled its purpose, most members had been seized by an attitude of 'passive contemplation', reinforced by the indulgent adoration that characterized 'pro-situ circles'.

By announcing the extinction of the S.I., Debord and Sanguinetti wished to avoid converting its positions into an ossified 'revolutionary ideology'. In their view, the aura created around the Situationists in the wake of May '68 had not been matched by their capacity to develop a coherent strategy to intervene upon the new historical situation. Now, that the 'last act' of a 'play concerning the

¹⁰ Debord 2005, pp.131-167.

¹¹ Debord and Sanguinetti 2003.

¹² On the 'orientation debate' in the S.I., see Bunyard 2017, pp.345-48.

¹³ Debord and Sanguinetti 2003.

world's destiny' was underway, the circumstances, scenery, extras 'and even the spirit of the principal protagonists' had changed. 'Autonomous revolutionary elements' and 'extremist worker's struggles' were emerging across the globe, forcing revolutionary theory to prove itself in the field of battle, 'the domain of danger and uncertainty' par excellence.

The real split in the International was a landmark in Debord's trajectory. Ever since its creation, in 1957, the S.I. had sought to identify the main contradictions of modern capitalist society, along with the new forms of revolt that would result from them. A radical critique of alienation, urban planning, wage labour, art, leftist politics and student life had filled the pages of *Internationale Situationiste*, along with analysis of new manifestations of class struggle, such as the Watts Riots.

But this was no longer enough after May '68. For Debord and Sanguinetti, it had become necessary to take a stand in each particular struggle, conceiving a new form of revolutionary organization, capable of mastering the 'totality of its theoretical and practical weapons' while, at the same time, 'refusing all delegation of power to a separate avant-garde'. It was necessary for the 'vast majority of the proletarian class' to 'hold and exercise all power, by organizing itself into permanent deliberative and executive

assemblies'. Debord summed up these reflections in a letter to Eduardo Rothe, in February 1974:

[...] the epoch no longer simply demands a vague response to the question "What is to be done?" [...] It is now a matter, if one wants to keep up with the flow, of responding, almost every week, to the following question: "What is happening?" [...] The principle work that I believe we now must contemplate is - as a complementary contrary to *The Society of the Spectacle*, which described frozen alienation (and the negation that is implicit in it) - the theory of historical action. One must advance strategic theory in this precise moment. At this stage, and to speak schematically, the basic theoreticians to retrieve and develop are no longer Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont, but Thucydides - Machiavelli - Clausewitz. Moreover, cinema - as we have agreed upon during an old discussion - has, when well handled, a potential for agitation that makes the best issue of *I.S.* look poor.¹⁴

¹⁴ Debord 2005, pp.126-27 (All passages of the published correspondence have been translated from French by the author, unless stated otherwise). Many of the letters have been translated to English and are available at <http://www.notbored.org/debord.html> (Accessed in 14 March 2020).

Defined as a counterpart to the theory of the Spectacle, the 'theory of historical action' should result from a practical engagement with class struggle, offering a clear perspective of the battlefield and a rigorous identification of the opposing forces. It demanded the comprehensive study of strategic theory throughout history, so as to develop a *scientia rei militaris* adequate to the modern forms of class struggle. Debord's subsequent attitude must be understood at the light of the ambitious programme laid out in this letter.

Even though he had severed his ties with many of the people with whom he had been involved during the previous fifteen years, Debord nevertheless possessed the capacity to manoeuvre with great skill across the European chessboard. Having re-established personal relations with Rothe and Paolo Salvadori (both of whom had been expelled from the Italian section of the S.I. in 1970), he travelled frequently to Florence, where he also met with Gianfranco Sanguinetti (and benefited from his financial support, at least until the partnership with Gerard Lebovici provided him with an alternative source of income).¹⁵ Debord would later encourage Sanguinetti to write a text on the complex political situation in Italy, which came out the following year, signed 'Censor' (*Rapporto*

¹⁵ Sanguinetti regularly transferred money to Debord's account in the Soviet-owned *Banque commerciale pour l'Europe du Nord*, between 1972 and 1974. Debord 2005, pp. 55, 57, 65, 67, 145.

veridico sulle ultime opportunità di salvare il capitalismo in Italia). It comes as little surprise that, shortly after hearing about the 25 April military coup, he started his letter to Sanguinetti with a brief line: 'We should be in Portugal this Spring...'.¹⁶

3. 'Our Party in Portugal': the *Conselho para o desenvolvimento da Revolução social*

The downfall of the Portuguese dictatorship offered the perfect opportunity to test the theses elaborated by Debord and Sanguinetti two years before. Shortly after writing to Sanguinetti, Debord sent a telegram to Afonso Monteiro - a Portuguese political exile who had, along with Francisco Alves, ensured the translation and publication of the Portuguese edition of *The Society of the Spectacle* - urging him to telephone to Paris immediately upon reaching Lisbon.¹⁷ On 8 May, in a letter to Monteiro, he proceeded to analyse the situation:

In Portugal today, everything can happen, but not in any way. The baroque beauty of the current situation - which, as it is today, obviously cannot last - appears to me to be a product of the objective, extreme poverty of Portuguese power, rather than the extreme stupidity of its capitalists or

¹⁶ Debord 2005, pp.139-41.

¹⁷ Marques 2015, pp.141-46.

General Spínola. Current Kerenskyism is dominated by a Kornilov (and Alvaro Cunhal is certainly not Lenin). [...] The current atmosphere seems to me to resemble, not so much May '68 or Budapest [in 1956], but the liberation of Paris in '44 or Northern Italy in '45. The end of fascism and the Gestapo, the hunt for collaborators, etc. [...] Capitalist democracy, at the moment that Portugal belatedly wants to rejoin it, is in a state of advanced socio-economic crisis in England, France and Italy. The forms of government in these countries no longer function, while revolutionary contestation is affirmed in the factories and all sectors of society. Thus, if a truly radical current can constitute itself at this moment in Portugal, it must understand and say all of this. What is being offered to us here has already gone bankrupt elsewhere,¹⁸

This was not merely a letter written to a distant friend in a moment of shared joy. Debord acted as the informal leader of the 'truly radical current' he wished to see established in Portugal. He attributed a set of tasks, pointing out the necessity 'to make the current situation a real revolution for our time', taking 'all that has been made, said and

¹⁸ Debord 2005, pp.153-157.

written, moreover, advanced in the world over the course of the last ten years' as its benchmark. He also took the care to underline, in accordance with his theory of historical action, that 'the exposition of a revolutionary perspective' should consist of 'describing and explaining what takes place day after day, without being satisfied with the ridiculous, abstract proclamation of general goals'. After suggesting three topics for agitation - the immediate end of the colonial war, denunciation of the governmental coalition and autonomy of worker's assemblies - Debord asked whether the arrival of 'other comrades' would be useful. He urged Afonso Monteiro to trust anyone coming 'on behalf of Glaukos' and, without awaiting for his response, wrote to Eduardo Rothe on that very same day:

I know life is beautiful in Florence and I am sure the city has adopted you as you deserve. Notwithstanding, I believe a traveller that has walked the planet and participated in all kinds of uprisings will wish to see the Portugal of these days. The twofold question is: how will this strange current situation evolve and what can our friends do? We will try to answer both questions. [...] Afonso Monteiro will be in Lisbon around 18th, 20th May, the latest. [...] It will be necessary to come from the part of

'Glaucos'. [...] Let me know: 1) whether you're going; 2) what you can conclude once you are there, after seeing Afonso; 3) whether it is desirable that I come (since I have a lot of important and urgent work to do, don't call me unless it's for a true revolution; in that case it would also be necessary to call Gianfranco, Paolo and surely others). The first condition would obviously be the possibility for 'our Party' to form - or perhaps join? - an autonomous group in Lisbon with its own basis of expression. I understand as little of Portuguese as I do of Dutch. ¹⁹

One can conclude that Debord looked at the situation in Portugal as an opportunity to develop the 'theory of historical action'. With radical worker's struggles popping up like mushrooms, the Portuguese Communist Party co-opted into government and the economy experiencing the effects of an international crisis, this small country, far removed in the Southwest corner of Europe, seemed ripe for a revolution that could go beyond May'68. In any case, Debord refrained from committing himself to tasks he considered to be of the utmost importance. Shortly after telling Rothe that he had a lot of important work to do, he left Paris for

¹⁹ Debord 2005, pp.158-59.

Champot (Auvergne), spending most of the summer in a mountain chalet.

Before 'Rayo' (the *nom de guerre* taken by Rothe) could reach Lisbon, Monteiro and his friends wrote and distributed, on 29 May, a poster with a manifesto entitled *Aviso ao proletariado português acerca da possibilidade da revolução social* ('Address to the Portuguese proletariat about the possibility of social revolution', inspired in the *Avviso as proletariato italiano sulle possibilita presenti della rivoluzione sociale*, a text published by the Italian section of the S.I. in 1969). The *Aviso* reproduced many of the remarks made by Debord in his letter to Monteiro, analysing the situation in Portugal through a set of historical analogies. It argued that the 'price for a democratic Portugal' was too high to pay for European capitalism, and workers should therefore expect few concessions. It encouraged the proletariat to pursue autonomous forms of organization, denouncing the plans of the Left-wing parties to contain its demands, so as to make them look 'acceptable' for the ruling class. It ended with a few slogans concerning the self-organization and autonomy of worker's assemblies, the end of the colonial war and the denunciation of the provisional government.

On 11 June, Debord wrote to Sanguinetti, telling him that his own analysis had been confirmed by recent events, both in terms of how

'the Stalinists' behaved and, more importantly, in what concerned 'the subversive possibilities scattered in the proletariat'.²⁰ The next day he wrote to Afonso Monteiro, congratulating him for the *Aviso* and adding that his letter 'magnificently described the very atmosphere of a revolutionary crisis'.²¹ In 25 June, in a letter sent to Jacques Le Glou, Debord did not hesitate to claim most credit for the poster to himself:

I have received very good news from friends in Lisbon. It is still not May '68 there, but it has many of its traits; and all this can even go still further, if the Stalino-Spinola repression - which has clearly begun - does not succeed in destroying the entire movement. Before leaving Paris, I sent down there several theses on what is happening and what could happen; and you can rightly suspect that no one was spared, except the revolutionary proletariat. All this has produced a superb poster, pasted on the walls of the town on 26 May by the '*Conselho para o desenvolvimento da revolucao social*' - thus, here is the new flag, or title, of "our party" in the current period.²²

²⁰ Debord 2005, p.166.

²¹ Debord 2005, p.168.

²² Debord 2005, pp.171-172.

Debord wrote to Eduardo Rothe the following day, noting that the *Aviso* (which he considered to be 'magnificent') had said 'the truth that all the other people live without knowing or without wanting to enunciate', namely that the ultimate goal of the wild strikes was to 'bring down political economy'.²³ He added that the 'participation of the Stalinists in the government' had become the 'modern form of counter-revolution' in a Europe that was 'collapsing'. Assuming that the *Conselho* was 'in contact with revolutionary workers', he emphasized the need for them to constitute 'their own liaisons (not only in street demonstrations and strikes, but in factory and neighbourhood assemblies)'. The importance of making the situation in Portugal known abroad was stressed once again:

If you can lay your hands on recently filmed documents (through the procedures of our 'Furniture Commission' of May '68 or by being in contact with cameramen or students at a film school), this would be very precious for a future cinematographic exposition of this moment. Furthermore, *if you have time*, one can also envision publishing a book in Paris (narrative and documents), because the most radical

²³ Debord 2005, pp. 174..

aspect of the situation is and obviously will remain hidden to foreigners, especially among the Left. Since you, dear Rayo, must write a book, this might be a good subject. I await more recent news from you concerning all that takes place. Long live the *Conselho para o desenvolvimento da revolucao social!* This is the slogan for the current period and the flag of 'our party'.²⁴

The prospect of publishing a book about Portugal was taken very seriously. In mid-July, Debord wrote to Gerard Lebovici, sending him a copy of the *Aviso* and asking him whether he would consider the possibility of publishing it, along with additional material.²⁵ By now, however, his early enthusiasm was turning into growing concern. Eduardo Rothe returned to Florence in early August, and Debord wrote to him, complaining for not having received further news from Portugal, apart from an envelope containing leaflets and newspaper pieces.²⁶ In a letter to Jacques Le Glou, on 9 August, he told him that the texts he received from Portugal had become 'increasingly difficult to translate'.²⁷ He also anticipated an upcoming confrontation

²⁴ Debord 2005, p.177.

²⁵ Debord 2005, p.184

²⁶ Debord 2005, p.189.

²⁷ Debord 2005, p.191.

between the 'dominant official force' and a 'contestation' that, according to Roth, resembled 'a thousand Mays and a dozen Lips'.

In 28 September, writing to unspecified 'comrades', he mentioned the fact that the French 'post worker's struggle against alienated labour', along with the 'growing incapacity of the system to manage its services in a rational way', had caused his correspondence to be delivered with three months of delay.²⁸ This could explain why he had not received news from Portugal during the summer of 1974.

Be that as it may, the limitations of the group operating in Lisbon were becoming manifest. In a letter to Sanguinetti, on 8 October, Debord complained about the 'lyrical' and 'imprecise' letters he received from Lisbon, which didn't allow him to understand what the *Conselho* had done so far and what it was planning to do in the future. He was forced to interpret events through French newspapers, with the obvious limitations this implied:

If, at first, taking into account the totality of what happened in 25 April, it was easy for me to describe what necessarily had to happen, what the several forces would tend to do, and, finally, what was not impossible to occur - it is quite evident that after five months of a complex process, we are

²⁸ Debord 2005, p.208.

increasingly unarmed to understand from afar what is likely, remote or about to happen; unless we are in touch with people concerned with letting us know in a proper way what they think about the most important factors and the way in which the passage of time confirms or not each one of their precise evaluations.²⁹

As news from Portugal became scarcer, Debord's interest in what was happening there also started to fade. He travelled to Italy shortly after this letter, along with his wife, Alice, to join Sanguinetti in a trip to Venice, Florence and Rome. His correspondence suffered an interruption at this point, and he would only be back in Paris in December. In January, in a letter to Sanguinetti, he noted that while the 'Stalinist direction in Portugal' had 'installed itself everywhere much more quickly than its real strength' would suggest, this didn't prevent it from facing the serious threat of 'Leftist demonstrations'.³⁰ He added that three months had passed since he had last received a letter from 'our Portuguese'.

News from Lisbon eventually arrived on 14 February, in a letter written by Afonso Monteiro and signed as 'Ulysses'. Debord responded ten days later, admitting the possibility that previous

²⁹ Debord 2005, p.210.

³⁰ Debord 2005, p.234 .

letters had been lost during the post worker's strike.³¹ He considered a demonstration organized by Workers Committees (*InterEmpresas*) in Lisbon, on 7 February, to be an historical landmark, since 'the modern proletariat had never gone as far as this'. He also ventured that the 'Stalinists, the military and others' would now be 'running to the elections of the Constituent Assembly', so as to 'make appear a legality that one can defend'. Finally, he made several direct questions:

At this moment, what is the degree of your "influence", and I'm not referring to the theoretical aspect, but in terms of direct contacts? What are you chiefly doing and what can you do? In what way can one help you? At present, can we consider that the proletariat is saying everything by itself and is in a position to impose by force what it is saying? What ideas dominate the Interenterprise Committee? (For example, what is its position on the elections, at what point do they feel that the Stalinists would like to put them down by force?) Who has been delegated by the committees? (Do Leftist groups play an important role in them? And

³¹ Debord 24 February 1975.

which ones?) How can you address yourself to the assemblies, to the Committee, etc.?³²

In spite of the relatively cordial tone, these questions expressed his growing concern with the lack of activity of the *Conselho*. In an attempt to encourage his 'Portuguese comrades', Debord suggested that they prepare a new poster, similar to the *Aviso*, capable of showing 'the profound meaning of this autonomous organization [*Interempresas*], the very logic of its action and to put it on guard against all those who would fight against it'. A new letter would follow in March. After Debord met with 'Penelope' (Antónia Monteiro, married to Afonso Monteiro) and 'Rayo' (Eduardo Rothe) in Paris, he offered Afonso Monteiro 'the most concise summary' of his own opinions:

1) Portugal is currently undergoing a proletarian revolution and it will almost certainly be defeated. [...] 2) Your public activity in the movement has remained below what can be done, because you have taken excellent positions, but too rarely. [...] I regret a little that you did not call upon me in September. It seems to me that at that moment - several

³² Debord 2005, p.242.

days before the 28th - you had not really taken into account the first autonomous demonstration of the workers, the tract for which I have only seen now; it was reserved in its form, but contained quite clear, radical allusions. [...] At the stage that has now been reached, I suppose that it is quite late for groups with very limited means to have a great usefulness: because everything will be played out in a much larger theatre and the three blows have been struck.

3) The revolutionary situation in Portugal is almost totally unknown in all the milieus - even the extremist ones - of all countries: whatever happens, it will be important to publish the maximum of the truth outside of Portugal.³³

Debord insisted once more on the need for a book, regretting the fact that the material written by 'Rayo', however 'eloquent in describing the modern revolution in general', contained very little about the specific features of the Portuguese Revolution.

He wrote again to Afonso and Antónia Monteiro, on 10 April, telling them he was 'touched' by their invitation to come to Lisbon.³⁴ He nevertheless remained evasive, arguing that this would depend on the possibility of 'doing something useful on behalf of the

³³ Debord 2005, pp.249-250.

³⁴ Debord 2005, pp.259-60

movement', since he had no intention of travelling to Portugal 'as a tourist'. After repeating that a small group like theirs stood little chance of influencing the course of events, Debord insisted on the importance of producing a book. However, he added that he no longer counted upon 'Rayo' to write it, since they had ended their relation over 'futile personal affairs' (which he chose not to reveal).

Debord was now using the expression 'our party' in a much broader and unspecified way, probably inspired by Karl Marx's letter to Ferdinand Freiligrath, in 1860, where the former claimed his allegiance to a 'Party in the broad historical sense', that is, 'a Party that is everywhere springing up naturally out of the soil of modern society', taking on different forms according to time and place.³⁵ On 20 May, while advising Sanguinetti about the best way to respond 'to the shadowy imputations of the Italian police and the Stalinists' against him, Debord told him that he should openly declare that a 'situationist current' was 'easily recognizable in the most advanced struggles in the factories of Europe' and it was 'globally well known that, at the moment, it is especially in Portugal that, with the greatest success, it fights capitalism, Stalinism and its captains, reformism

³⁵ Marx and Engels 2010, pp.80-88.

and what remains of fascism.'³⁶ On 24 July, in another letter to Sanguinetti, he made a similar remark:

In Portugal, 'our party' has made immense progress. The open struggle between the Stalinists and their generals, on the one hand, and Soares and all of the moderates and traditional counter-revolutionaries, on the other hand, seems to be the final battle that will decide which side will be the master of the State that will have to confront the workers, make them keep quiet and quickly put them back to work - or perish.³⁷

The 'party' to which Debord alluded was no longer a concrete group of people, the 'truly radical current' he had envisaged in May 1974. It had become a vague denomination, extended to all those who struggled against capitalism and challenged the authority of the State. Even though he was still concerned with the strategic challenges posed by the Carnation Revolution, Debord was now reduced to watch it from afar and seemed more concerned with a text that Sanguinetti was writing about Italy, that would eventually be published under the title *Rapporto veridico sulle ultime opportunità di*

³⁶ Debord 2005, p.269.

³⁷ Debord 2005, p.287.

salvare il capitalismo in Italia. Debord did, however, maintain the project of publishing a book about class struggle in Portugal. Since neither Rothe nor Monteiro seemed able to write it, he turned to his Parisian contacts. Jaime Semprún, whom he had met in Paris, through Rothe, took up the task, delivering it in less than a month.

4. 'All the world is like this town called Lisbon': *La Guerre Social au Portugal*

Published by *Éditions Champ Libre*, *La Guerre sociale au Portugal* came off the printing press on 16 May 1975.³⁸ It relied heavily on the material collected by Eduardo Rothe and other members of the *Conselho Para o Desenvolvimento da Revolução Social*, along with the analysis made by Debord and a few pieces published in the French press. The book was a short but elegant piece of prose, written in the baroque style that Debord and Sanguinetti appreciated so much. It opened with a *detournement* of a song by the Lincoln Brigade (formed by North American volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War): 'All this world is like this town called Lisbon'.³⁹

La guerre sociale au Portugal covered the entire revolutionary process until the Spring of 1975, highlighting its most decisive moments: the 'wildcat' strikes of May and June 1974, the repression

³⁸ Los incontrolados 2014.

³⁹ The original read 'All this world is like this valley called Jarama'.

of workers at TAP (the Portuguese airline company) by the military on 27 August 1974; the demonstration organized by the workers of Lisnave (a large shipyard located across the river from Lisbon), in 12 September 1974 (prohibited by the government and considered a 'provocation' by the Portuguese Communist Party); the confrontation between Spínola and the Left in 28 September 1974 and 11 March 1975; the demonstration organized by *Interempresas* in 7 February 1975 (which was also prohibited by the government, but drew over fifty thousand workers to the streets). The global significance of events in Portugal was repeatedly emphasized:

The immensity of the present tasks faced by Portuguese workers is that of modern revolution in all countries, and the strangeness of what is happening in Portugal is not of a geographic, but rather historical nature: the proletariat, which is everywhere abandoning the same night, in which only the watchmen differ, must learn and reinvent by itself everything it does; but today more than ever it is able to do so because it has freed itself from all the ideological mediations coming between it and the meaning of its own actions; and it must forcibly do so in Portugal, because its first actions have already filled its enemies with such terror

that only by annihilating them will it be able to avoid their reprisals.⁴⁰

Semprún ruthlessly denounced the Portuguese Left, depicting it as a distorted mirror image of its French counterparts: 'the Stalinists' of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), but also the Socialist Party (PS) led by Mário Soares and the numerous far-left organizations, amongst which the Maoists and Marxist-Leninists were the more numerous. At certain points, the book revealed some difficulty in grasping the most intricate aspects of the situation: it greatly underestimated the capacity of the PCP and the *Intersindical* (the trade-union confederation under its influence) to recuperate and institutionalize worker's struggles; it failed to acknowledge the influence of the far-left over what it described as 'workers' autonomy'; it downplayed the capacity of the Socialist Party to rally the large majority of counter-revolutionary forces against the 'radical' wing of the Armed Forces Movement (which comprised both the Far-Left and the PCP).

In spite of these shortcomings, Semprún offered a vivid account of a process about which little was known outside of Portugal. Unlike many foreign observers, he placed class struggle at the centre stage

⁴⁰ Semprun 1976, p.16 (author's translation).

of historical events, portraying the oscillations of the institutional sphere as a mere smokescreen devised to conceal it. He also offered an epic resonance to the antagonism between the 'revolutionary proletariat' and the different factions competing for State power:

If ever an event projected its shadow ahead of it long before it took place, one must mention the decisive confrontation between the Portuguese proletariat and all of its enemies. [...] Because the historical initiative of their Portuguese comrades has already contributed to bring the struggle of Spanish workers to a new stage, and everything leads to believe that a decisive fight in Lisbon would act like an electrical shock to the masses, stirring up their old memories and revolutionary passions. The ongoing struggle is the second offensive of the revolutionary epoch which began in 1968 and, just like the first, brought ridicule upon all of the illusions of the previous epoch, all of the illusions concerning the stability of the existing order, this one bring ridicule upon all of the illusions about the subsequent instability and all of the illusions about the revolution. The Portuguese proletariat has precipitated the

course of modern history. It can precipitate it even more, and even triumph. But whatever the outcome of this struggle, the world proletariat has reached a new point of departure of universal historical importance.⁴¹

The distinguishing feature of Semprún's book was, however, its timeliness. Leaving aside the texts belonging to other political traditions (such as the ones written by Nicos Poulantzas, Paul M. Sweezy, Daniel Bensaïd, Alain Badiou or Tony Cliff ⁴²), the majority of the analysis produced by the 'autonomous' or 'councilist' milieu were only published after the revolutionary tide in Portugal had waned out: Maurice Brinton's diary notes appeared on *Solidarity* in December 1975, Loren Goldner's essay was written in 1976, whereas Phil Mailer, who lived in Portugal throughout 1974-75, had his book printed in 1977.⁴³ Unlike Semprún, neither of them took the risk of anticipating possible outcomes. Even though they all looked favourably upon worker's autonomy and denounced the attempts - undertaken by either the military, the Communist Party or the Far-Left - to build a regime of 'State Capitalism', Brinton, Goldner and Mailer contented themselves with writing an epitaph to a movement

⁴¹ Semprún 1976, p.81 (author's translation).

⁴² Poulantzas 1976; Sweezy 1975; Bensaïd *et al.* 1975; Badiou and Lazarus 1976; Cliff 1982.

⁴³ Brinton 1975; Goldner 2000; Mailer 1977. There is also a collection of manifestos and pamphlets that came out in Paris around the same time, but its introduction is far less ambitious when it comes to the historical interpretation of events. Cf. Reeve *et al.* 1975.

that had already been defeated, whereas Semprún attempted to single out the conditions under which that movement could still emerge victorious.⁴⁴ Another important difference is that most of the aforementioned authors (of all areas of the Left) derived their explanation of events from a generic (and sometimes rather schematic) characterization of Portuguese society, whereas Semprún's narrative emphasized the importance of contingent decisions, taken by specific historical actors, and tried to explain the underlying logic that lay behind them. More than an accurate historical assessment, *La Guerre Sociale au Portugal* should be read as a historical document, that shows how an informal post-Situationist current, scattered around Europe (but with an undisputed Parisian centre), analysed the Portuguese revolutionary process from afar, as it was unfolding. Rather than a balance sheet, the book was an attempt to develop a theory of historical action aligned with the demands of its epoch. It was also an illustration of how difficult it was to conceive a revolutionary strategy that went beyond the national framework. Semprún assumed all too frequently that what was happening in the streets of Lisbon could be understood by ways of analogy and equivalence, remaining trapped

⁴⁴ On a side-note, it is worth stressing that Mailer's book has aged quite well, benefiting from its author's first-hand experience of events and his knowledge of Portuguese. Mailer was a member of the group that edited the weekly newspaper *Combate*, a councilist publication that offered worker's committees a platform to spread their communiqués. ,

within the parochialism of Parisian intellectual life and unable to grasp crucial aspects of the intricate and volatile revolutionary situation in Portugal.

Shortly after the book reached the shops, Debord wrote to Lebovici, telling him it was '*magnifique*'.⁴⁵ He also wrote to Semprún by the end of May, congratulating him and urging him to publish the book in Spain with the utmost urgency:

I believe that this is the first time that one can read such a book *before* the failure of a revolution. Until now, consciousness has always arrived too late, at least in publishing! This thunderclap was permitted by the slowness of the Portuguese process, the product of the great weakness of all the factions that coexist in a disequilibrium slowed down from all sides (certain weakness with respect to the immensity of their tasks, because even the repressive task with which the Stalinists are charged is no small affair).⁴⁶

Debord was now busy working on his fifth film, that would come out in October, with the title *Refutation of All the Judgments, Pro or Con*,

⁴⁵ Debord 2005, p. 272.

⁴⁶ Debord 2005, p.273.

Thus Far Rendered on the Film "The Society of the Spectacle". He had asked the production team, led by Martine Barraqué, to acquire as many images from Portugal as possible.⁴⁷ His comments on the Portuguese revolutionary situation occupied pride of place:

There are people who understand, and others who do not understand, that the class struggle in Portugal has from the very beginning been dominated by a direct confrontation between the revolutionary workers organized in autonomous assemblies and the Stalinist bureaucracy allied with a few defeated generals. Those who understand such things will understand my film; and I don't make films for those who don't understand such things, or who make it their business to prevent others from understanding.⁴⁸

Like Semprún's book, this was an attempt to develop a theory of historical action, capable of clarifying the meaning of historical events as they unfolded. But Debord now had to rely primarily on the news written by the correspondent of *Le Monde*, Dominique Pouchin, in order to keep up with the revolutionary situation in Portugal. This originated several errors of interpretation, as when he

⁴⁷ Debord 2005, p.277.

⁴⁸ Debord 2003, p. 118. See also Wark 2013, pp.125-136.

concluded that the occupation of the premises of *República* (a private newspaper aligned with the Socialist Party), undertaken by print workers, had been little more than an attempt by 'the Stalinists' to silence their opponents.⁴⁹ Indeed, as late as 24 June, when the balance of forces in Portugal was leaning more and more towards the Socialist Party (supported by the U.S. Embassy and the governments of the U.K., G.D.R. and Sweden), Debord still considered that the true battle would be waged between 'the cynical Stalinist infiltrators and the Workers' Councils'.⁵⁰ The reflections he had shared with Sanguinetti a year before - concerning the difficulty 'to understand from afar what is likely, remote or about to happen' - had given way to a set of assertive judgments that often missed their mark. Debord was also growingly disdainful of the *Conselho para o desenvolvimento da revolução social*, warning Semprún against the 'affective phenomenon, typically pro-situ, of jealousy' that should be expected from 'those who have done nothing'.⁵¹ In a letter to Sanguinetti, in mid-August, he also revealed the high regard he held for himself:

⁴⁹ Debord 2005, pp. 273-275. The occupation was actually opposed by the PCP and supported by the Far-Left. *República* would eventually be published under self-management, opening up its pages to other grass-root organizations.

⁵⁰ Debord 2005, pp.279-281.

⁵¹ Debord 2005, pp.279-282. .

The most recent news from Lisbon is so obscure and so off the subject (and especially with respect to all of my questions) that I am worn out from responding. The crisis appears to be at a decisive turning point and the talent of our poor friends completely insufficient to play a notable role in it.[...] From whence comes a multitude of pressing invitations to bring me to Lisbon *in April*, whereas it was in October 1974 that they should have summoned me.[...] As you have recently said, and with great justness, "there are not three great men in France," and I have made it known that one of them will only displace himself, at *this stage*, if he is summoned by an autonomous assembly of workers!⁵²

Even though he was gradually losing interest on the subject, Debord felt the need for a final *mise au point*. He therefore addressed a long letter to 'Afonso Monteiro and friends' on 15 November:

Your recent invitations to bring me to Lisbon as soon as possible seem to call for a clear response. For more than six months, I have discerned several ambiguities concerning this question (which is obviously linked to the

⁵² Debord 2005, p.291-292.

question of what you yourselves are, that is to say, of what you do and how you do it). [...] You certainly know that, after what I have had the occasion to do for a great number of years, the first 'duty' that I have with respect to the revolution in all countries is to demonstrate that in no way do I have the intention or the obligation to hold the role of leader (in the same way that others have failed the more simple obligation to prove that the success of their avant-garde critique does not oblige them to compromise with the dominant organization of things and thus be recognized and recuperated by it). [...] I would obviously be disposed towards supporting the movement itself, not, as you say, with my "experience" - everyone in Portugal has more experience with the current situation than I have had - but with my *talents* that could be used by it (as an analyst of the relationships of the forces at play from day to day, and as a military expert) where the movement would give itself the forms of consciousness and practical organization that would require this use of my capacities. But it is perfectly clear that you yourselves are not part of such a movement. [...] While the Portuguese proletariat has gone further than the May 1968 movement, in 18 months you have certainly

not attained the importance and usefulness that the C.M.D.O. acquired in 18 days: a place from which "the process" expresses what it is and what it can do. [...] what have you done to make this immense experiment known to a world *that is still unaware of it*? Because a veritable victory in Portugal could more quickly take Europe where it wants to go and, inversely, a local defeat could be re-played elsewhere and often.⁵³

Debord concluded his letter with the claim that he would only come to Lisbon in order to spend time with Leonor Gouveia, a former political exile he had met in Paris, of whom both he and Sanguinetti were very fond. Gouveia had gone to Mozambique during the summer, where she died of malaria.⁵⁴ With her death, he concluded, there was nothing worth seeing in Lisbon anymore.

The revolutionary crisis would come to an end ten days later, when a group of 'moderate' military officers defeated the 'radical' wing of the Armed Forces Movement. But even though order reigned in Lisbon, no bloodbath followed, and the decisive confrontation anticipated in *La guerre sociale au Portugal* failed to materialized, for reasons that go well beyond the scope of this article. Debord

⁵³ Debord 2005, pp. 307-313.

⁵⁴ Debord 2005, p. 306. On Leonor Gouveia, see also Ramalho 2014.

would latter criticize Semprún for not having analysed the defeat of the Portuguese Revolution more thoroughly, instead of minimizing it, 'as if it was a slight unevenness in the distance to be covered'.⁵⁵ But all of this had now become secondary. As the revolutionary epoch opened by May '68 came to a close, the drama played out in Portugal started to fade into oblivion. It had become impossible to know whether all the world looked like Lisbon or the other way around.

4. Conclusion. 'Men come and go as leaves'

The correspondence of Guy Debord confronts us with two sets of problems. The first corresponds to the difficulty of conceiving a genuinely international revolutionary strategy. While friendly relations between political organizations from different countries are quite common, the development of a shared strategy remains an entirely different matter. Organizing across the borders of the nation-state requires the capacity to analyse events from a distance, which brings up the obvious problem of translation and communication. Furthermore, evaluating the prevalent correlation of forces - along with its variations across different sectors and regions - demands a profound understanding of context, as well as concrete liaisons on

⁵⁵ Debord 26 December 1976.

the terrain. A radical current that wishes to move beyond a mere analysis of the existing situation, so as to interfere with it, is inevitably confronted with all sorts of challenges.

This problem occasionally surfaced in Debord's letters, particularly when he emphasized the limits of what he was able to understand from a distance, but also when he expressed his doubts regarding what small groups were capable of doing in a major revolutionary situation. However, this did not prompt him to develop a more serious reflection on the topic of organization, apart from some scarce references to the need to act 'autonomously'. In the end, when Debord felt the need to provide an example of what he considered to be the proper role of a revolutionary organization, he simply turned back to the C.M.D.O., the collective briefly formed by the Situationists and a few *compagnons de route* in Paris during May '68. It was as if the *Thesis on the S.I. and its time* had never been written at all. The 'theory of historical action' remained a set of abstract principles, that could find neither the practical instruments nor the actors to become a material force.

Which leads us to the second tier of problems, related with the difficulties in conciliating a bohemian style of life with the requirements of a strategic intervention upon the historical stage. An enthusiastic reader of texts from classical antiquity, Debord

frequently measured his own actions against the yardstick of epic poetry:

Other eras have had their own great conflicts, conflicts which they did not choose but which nevertheless forced people to choose which side they were on. Such conflicts dominate whole generations, founding or destroying empires and their cultures. The mission is to take Troy — or to defend it.⁵⁶

The choice of 'Glaucos' as a *nom de guerre* derived from the Sixth Book of the *Iliad*, where Homer has 'Glaucos' (a Lycian captain who comes to Troy to fight alongside its defenders) telling Diomedes (one of the mightiest warriors amongst the Greeks) that 'men come and go as leaves, year by year upon the trees', and 'so is it with the generations of mankind, the new spring up as the old are passing away'.⁵⁷ It was the obvious dialectical resonance of the dialogue - with its stress on the fluidity of time - that caught the eye of Debord. But his choice of pseudonym - and it is worth recalling that Debord always used names of persons he admired, such as 'Gondi' (the

⁵⁶ Debord 1978.

⁵⁷ Homer 2009, p.106.

Cardinal of Retz, whose *Mémoires* he was very fond of) - is also revealing of how he perceived his own historical role.

Debord had long been trying to develop a theory of historical action capable of matching his critique of the 'Spectacle', and he insisted that this required a direct involvement with the struggles that were unfolding across the globe. The Carnation Revolution appeared to be one of those great conflicts in which the fate of the world would be decided for generations. But unlike 'Glaucos', Debord chose not to come to Troy and join its defenders. In spite of the importance he attributed to the Revolution in Portugal, he preferred to spend the summer in Auvergne, with Alice Becker-Ho, before travelling to Italy to meet Gianfranco Sanguinetti. This makes it particularly difficult to understand why he would later lament the fact that he was not warned that a 'true revolution' was taking place in Portugal.

The reasons Debord invoked for not travelling to Lisbon are easy to understand. He could hardly have played a relevant role in a country where he did not speak the language and did not fully trust his personal contacts. However, many of his arguments need to be taken with a grain of salt. The notion that it had become too late, in the Spring of 1975, to intervene upon the revolutionary stage, for instance, ran against what Semprún wrote in a book that he helped to publish and considered to be 'magnificent'. Even after he became

aware that a 'true revolution' was taking place, at a time when a decisive confrontation was building up, he nevertheless opted to remain in Paris. If the 'last act' of a play concerning the world's destiny was underway, demanding that revolutionary theory proved itself on the field of battle - 'the domain of danger and uncertainty by definition' - how could Debord refrain from joining a revolutionary process in which the proletariat had gone further than any time before? This contradiction was quite striking at times, making us doubt whether the motives he invoked in his correspondence were not merely pretexts to stay where he felt more comfortable.

The correspondence raises a few more questions. The fact that Debord relied on the French press to analyse the Portuguese Revolution is surprising, considering how frequently he denounced journalists for misjudging or distorting historical events. On the other hand, Debord emphatically claimed not to wish to 'command' others. However, as early as May 1974, he was practically dictating to his 'Portuguese comrades' what they should say and do, as well as encouraging others to come to Lisbon, moving them across the European board as if they were pieces of his *kriegsspiel*.

This suggests an insurmountable ambiguity, or, at the very least, an unresolved tension, between Debord's aesthetical inclinations and

his strategic aspirations.⁵⁸ That he never confronted himself with this problem becomes particularly evident in his last film, *In Girum imus nocte et consumimur ignis*, when Debord insists on the need to engage oneself in decisive battles, no matter what the conditions and the possible cost:

Those who never take action would like to believe that you can freely determine the quality of your fellow combatants and the time and place where you can strike an unstoppable and definitive blow. But in reality you have to act with what is at hand, launching a sudden attack on one or another realistically attackable position the moment you see a favourable opportunity; otherwise you fade away without having done a thing. [...] Despite the fantasies of the spectators of history who try to set up shop as strategists and who see everything from the vantage point of Sirius, the most sublime theory can never guarantee an event. On the contrary, it is the unfolding of an event that may or may not verify a theory. Risks must be taken, and you have to pay up front to see what comes next.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ This tension is partially touched in Bunyard 2017, p.352.

⁵⁹ Debord 1978.

Debord kept on writing with the same peremptory tone, as if nothing important had happened, which suggests that he was impermeable to any sort of self-criticism. Keeping himself at a safe distance, he encouraged others to write about a revolution that he preferred not to join. In this regard, Paris quite resembled the vantage point of Sirius. Rather than Thucydides, Machiavelli or Clausewitz, this stand reminds us of Bartleby, the melancholic scrivener conjured by Melville's imagination, who simply preferred not to.

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