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Guy Debord - Revolutionary

Reviewed by John Zerzan

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From *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* #44,
Fall/Winter 1997-'98, Vol. 15, No. 2

Guy Debord-Revolutionary by Len Bracken (Feral House, 2532 Lincoln Blvd., Suite 359, Venice CA 90021, 1997) 267 pp. \$14.95 paper

In the mid-90s Len Bracken edited and published *Extraphile*, a very lively and very Debordian magazine. When I heard of his biography of Debord, "the first in any language," I frankly wondered whether it would merit the additional claim, that of being a *critical* biography.

It was my pleasure to discover that Bracken has indeed managed some critical distance from his subject, and has produced a most substantial intellectual biography. It is, it should be noted right off, a treatment of Debord's political/philosophical project, not the story of his personal life. There is very little of the latter; his heavy drinking is referred to only in passing, for example, and his two marriages merely cited.

A couple of quibbles: the book does contain a few small errors that I found occasionally distracting. In the matter of dates, for example, we are told that poet Arthur Craven died in 1918

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and, two paragraphs later, that he "disappeared in Mexico in 1920." Marx, it is recorded, died in 1863, which is 20 years premature. Later in the volume one reads of the German revolution of 1948, that Marx predicted in 1947; obviously a century late. Social theorist Lucien Goldmann and film-maker Jean-Luc Godard are misspelled throughout the book and in the index, as Goldman and Goddard.

And Bracken is not what I would call a prose stylist. The writing is generally serviceable, at times a little better than that, but often clunky and occasionally opaque. For an example of the latter, I could not coax a clear meaning from this sentence: "Lukacs developed Marx's concept of fetishism with psychology and history into reification in large part by positing the proletariat as the subject-object of history."

Guy Debord (1931-1994) was the leading figure of the avant-garde Lettrist International of the 1950s and, more importantly, the central theoretician of the Situationist International (1957-1972). He and other Situationists, like the Surrealists twenty years earlier, sought to deepen their cultural critique by appropriations from marxism. But while the surrealists tried to strengthen their aesthetic protests, in the 1920s and '30s, via involvement in leninist perspectives (stalinism and then trotskyism), Debord and his coterie brought in the relatively more libertarian variant of marxism, council communism.

Bracken refers to a rather autocratic style of Debord in the S.I., at least in passing, which is related to a larger, and undiscussed problem: a situationist fetish of organization. The fixation with internal organization was, in turn, connected to what Debord saw as the over-arching solution to the social question: the "absolute power of workers' councils." For his part Bracken at least mentions the "apparent contradiction" between a councilist solution to alienation and the equally strong situationist emphasis on festival, play, enjoyment without restraint, etc. He writes that in this latter regard and in his personal life, Debord "didn't value work in the least." But it might have been fruitful

to discuss the rather obvious tension between a unitary power based on the category of work, to which all issues would be submitted, and abundant rhetoric about an equally unrestricted focus on ludic individuality.

A great strength of the book is the background Bracken provides on the development of Debord's thinking. Very adequate thumbnail sketches of often difficult-to-condense influences (e.g. Hegel, Lukacs, Lefebvre) illuminate the sources of Debord's maturation as radical thinker and leader.

His treatment of his subject's masterwork, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), is likewise strong. Proceeding carefully, Len Bracken sketches the complementary meanings of the concept of spectacle. If I were to advance a criticism here, it is only that this highly important work does not essentially escape its huge debt to Hegel and Marx, and that herein lie the grounds from which to discuss its limitations. When it is disclosed that life has somehow moved from being lived to being experienced as representation, a discussion of representation itself becomes possible, for example.

Of course, it is easy and maybe unfair to demand everything from a text written thirty years ago, including, to cite another theme, at least a slight realization of the pitfalls, shall we say, of society as a machine for production and a technological construct. My own orientation, to be more positive, has been greatly aided by the odyssey of Guy Debord: I have been deeply moved by his works, especially the defiantly elegiac, brief memoir *Panegyric*, and the passionate and so nearly comprehensive (film) book *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* (*We Go Round and Round in the Night and Are Consumed by Fire*).

As Len Bracken concludes, even if Debord's theses become dated it will be his courage that will continue to serve as inspiring method. *In Girum...* ends with a personal valediction that I will never forget: "As these last reflections on violence still show, for me there will be no going back and no reconciliation. There will be no good conduct."