Article

Situationism and the recuperation of an ideology in the era of Trump, fake news and post-truth politics

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Abstract

As a variant ideology based on libertarian Marxism, the philosophy of situationism failed to achieve widespread popularity beyond a relatively brief time frame between the late 1950s and early 1970s. Despite this short-lived period of ascendency, the impact of Situationist concepts such as psychogeography, recuperation and the Spectacle have continued to play a role in the ongoing study of how reality is constructed in a system of advanced capitalism. Situationism's concern with the perception of reality as shaped by the mass media is of particular significance in the context of contemporary politics that has been dubbed the 'post-truth era'. The disavowal of the mass media by US President Donald Trump may give the impression of a Situationist approach that rejects the impact of such reality-shaping tools, yet a closer inspection of his actions suggests that Trump himself is responsible for the construction of a neo-Spectacle in which the recuperation of anti-establishment sentiment provides the basis for the reconsolidation of the position held by the capitalist elite within American society.

Keywords

Debord, Marxism, recuperation, situationism, Spectacle, Trump

Introduction

Amidst the sociopolitical upheaval of the mid-20th century, the philosophy of anti-authoritarian Marxism assumed a divisive position that rejected the traditional notions

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of structural change that typified the mainstream activist movement. From its inception in 1957 until the early 1970s, this branch of libertarian Marxism was primarily led by acolytes of the Situationist International. A collective of predominantly European social revolutionaries and avant-garde intellectuals, the Situational International advocated the need for total upheaval of established sociocultural structures in the developed world; situationism argued that the revolutionary movements of the early 20th century had already failed and been replaced by an advanced capitalism in which all human experience was commodified and mediated to achieve the pacification and subjugation of the masses (Plant 1992). As situationism developed from its origins as an artistic cultural movement into a more defined political theory in the late 1960s, the concept of 'the Spectacle' assumed a central position within the discourse of the movement. Established in a series of Marxist treatises espoused by Debord in 1967, the Spectacle refers to the concept that social life has been replaced by a facsimile of reality that was constructed by a controlling elite and sold to the masses by way of the commodification of experience (Debord 2002). Situationists argued that this mediation of reality and fetishisation of material commodities led to a degradation in society that was at the core of class inequality and alienation. It was the position of Situationists that it was impossible to rectify this condition within the existing social system, advocating instead in favour of a total societal overhaul and a state of permanent revolution (Mubi Brighenti 2008).

Situationism served throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s as a rallying point for libertarian Marxists in their struggle against their opposition in the capitalist establishment; nevertheless, by the mid-1970s, the popularity of situationism had waned in favour of more traditional forms of political resistance (Shank 1999). Despite the relatively short-lived ascendency of situationism, the emergence of post-truth politics provides sufficient cause to reassess the validity of the Situationist philosophy and the existence of the Spectacle as a guiding factor of contemporary sociopolitical relations. To a certain extent, it seems that the support for the idea of 'fake news' by establishment figures like US President Donald Trump is in clear alignment with the Situationist belief that the mass media intentionally shapes the perception of reality experienced by the general public as a means of consolidating power. That being said, the rise of Trump in itself could be perceived as an illustration of the Spectacle at its zenith wherein a reality television personality notorious for his material excess was able to ascend to what is arguably the supreme position of political authority in the modern world. Analysis of Situationist philosophy in the post-truth era, particularly in regard to the Trump presidency, highlights a contradiction in terms wherein the apparent repudiation of the Spectacle is used as a weapon in the advancement of a political figure that embodies the qualities of advanced capitalism. Trump's reference to the Spectacle and 'fake news' could be argued as a recuperation of the Situationist model itself, using the tools of the mid-20th-century movement to capitalise on the public's hostility towards the mainstream media to reassert the primacy of the capitalist agenda.

Background

Situationism's roots can be traced to the Lettrist movement led by French poet and artist Isidore Isou in the mid-to-late 1940s (Cabanas 2014). Lettrism drew upon a combination

of Dadaism and Surrealism in its construction of an avant-garde philosophy that sought to reassert the primacy of the creative in post-war society; in particular, Isou felt that young people and the creative bohemian community were fundamentally excluded from the capitalist structures of European society and that it was necessary to establish a role for this considerable section of the population to avoid their creativity being channelled into criminal activity and other forms of deviance (King 2016). Situationism initially developed as an offshoot of Isou's artistic movement referred to as the Lettrist International, which consisted of many of the younger and more radical adherents to Lettrism such as prominent future leaders of situationism Michèle Bernstein and Guy Debord. The schism between Isou's Lettrism and the Lettrist International occurred in late 1952 as a result of Isou's opposition to the group's engagement in direct political action (Wollen 1989). Nevertheless, it was 5 years before the Lettrist International would develop into the Situationist International. In the intervening period between the formation of the Lettrist International and its transition into the Situationist International, many of the tenets of the latter philosophy were developed and shaped into a philosophy that foregrounded political radicalism in lieu of the artistic ambitions of Lettrism.

From its earliest origins as an offshoot of Lettrism, it was the intention of Debord and his cohorts that situationism would not constitute an ideology in the traditional sense of the term. Debord held the position that ideology was 'the intellectual basis of class societies … (and) represent a distorted consciousness of realities' in a manner that is intrinsically associated with the development of the Spectacle (Debord 2002: 56). As a result of this view, early adherents such as Debord considered situationism more of a philosophy than an ideology in the same vein as Marxism or Capitalism. Rather than solely focusing on political considerations, situationism was conceived as a set of ideas that drew more on the tenets of social psychology than it did economics. It was the belief of Debord and his fellow breakaway Lettrists that emotive force-fields existed within the urban landscape that operated to perpetuate the oppression of the proletariat. Debord (2008) defined these patterns as psychogeography or 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (p. 23).

Debord and the Lettrist International advocated a practice of *derive*, or drift, to combat the conditions of psychogeography in the urban environment. Engaging in *derive* required an individual to aimlessly explore their physical environment outside of their traditional areas of residence; to do so would allow a person to traverse through a range of emotional ambiences and precipitate a 'situation' wherein they were able to have an authentic and unmediated psycho-emotional experience (Bonnett 1989). Later interpretations of psychogeography under a Situationist framework considered the emotional ambience of urban locales to be a manifestation of the state's attempt to suppress the general population. By contributing to a situation in which the masses were forced to live in certain environments based on capitalist considerations, Situationists typically believe that the establishment commits an act of state violence in limiting the opportunities of the people to live an authentic and genuine reality (Carr 2010). Control of the physical environment acted as a repressive manifestation of advanced capitalism that maintained the status quo and restricted opportunity for authentic experience to an exclusive subsect of the population with the financial ability to rise above the confines of psychogeography. Belief in the substantial influence of psychography on the subjugation of the masses was a key philosophy developed by the

Lettrist International and was later adopted by the Situationist International after it was established as a collective of radical political organisations on 28 July 1957 (Gray 1998).

Despite the fact that the Situationist International was formed as a coalition of similarly inclined left-wing organisations, it is clear that former members of the Lettrist International were integral in the foundation of the Situationist philosophy. Indeed, it was Debord who was responsible for the publication of situationism's seminal text in 1967 by way of *The Society of the Spectacle*. Although written in the form of 221 individual theses, the overarching aim of Debord's book was to outline the concept of 'the Spectacle': a societal construct in which the mass media is purposefully used to facilitate the fetishism of commodities, class-based alienation and reinforce existing power structures to the benefit of the capitalist establishment (Debord 2002). It was Debord's belief that the Spectacle had come into existence in the 1920s as a result of the growing importance of the mass media and the public relations techniques pioneered in the campaigns developed by Bernays. A steadily rising wave of consumerism throughout the 20th century had led to a scenario in which material objects had accrued a social value by which they were able to, in the words of Marx (1977), 'rule the producers instead of being ruled by them' (p. 477). While an aversion to consumerism is a standard element of most strands of Marxist philosophy, Debord sought to develop Situationist philosophy around the mechanisms by which these material items obtained a social value; to this end, the Spectacle was designed to explain the means by which the mass media imposed value on the ownership of material goods and perpetuated a cycle of capitalist oppression (Debord 2002).

Resistance to the sociocultural pressures of the Spectacle was also at the forefront of Debord's development of the Situationist philosophy. More than simply referring to the ownership of consumer goods, it was the Spectacle's contention that advanced capitalism placated the population through the commodification of human action and lived experience; Debord considered the Spectacle to be an 'inversion of life' in which 'things that were once directly lived are now lived by proxy … developed to the detriment of the real … a substitute for experience' (Harris 2015: 33). Situationism considers this mediated version of reality to be a key factor in the repression of the masses and advocates in favour of rejecting the influence of the Spectacle by engaging in genuine experiences outside of the microcosm of society that they usually inhabit (Barnard 2004). Despite advocating in favour of engagement in subversive behaviours, Debord cautions that the Spectacle operates in such a way that even radical ideological movements are vulnerable to being co-opted into the dominant sociocultural zeitgeist. Debord claims that the establishment is able to effectively neutralise movements that destabilise the status quo through a process he referred to as 'recuperation': this occurs in situations wherein establishment intercepts radical concepts and, through the mass media processes of the Spectacle, simultaneously trivialises and commodifies them before reincorporating them into the mainstream social order (Bonnett 1999). Recuperation gives the impression of sociopolitical dissent, yet mitigates its impact by mediating the ways in which it is allowed to manifest; in doing so, Debord argued that individuals were prevented from having 'any direct access to the rigged game of official culture' and were therefore incapable of facilitating lasting or meaningful social change (McDonough 2004: 39).

Situationism achieved the peak of its influence during the period of civil unrest that occurred across France during May 1968. While official membership of Situationist International had fallen steadily in the years prior to these anti-consumerist riots, those

that remained a part of the movement played an active role both in terms of physical participation and shaping the discourse of the protest action (Ball 1987). Despite the Situationist International's involvement in the 1968 protests, its impact on the global left-wing agenda did not last into the 1970s: by the time the organisation disbanded in 1972, Debord was one of only two members remaining with the movement (Rasmussen 2006). Part of the marginalisation of situationism arose from its encouragement of direct action, resulting in violent anti-establishment bombing campaigns that were seen by the mainstream leftist movement as counterproductive to its goals of becoming a legitimate political alternative to conservative rule (Carr 2010). Between 1970 and 1972, a collective of libertarian Marxist activists operating as 'the Angry Brigade' conducted a series of bombings targeted at physical symbols of consumerism and the establishment such as banks, foreign embassies, the homes of Conservative MPs and even the 1970 Miss World contest in London (White 1993). Situationist rhetoric was heavily incorporated into the group's communiques to the police and media after each bombing incident, with reference to Debord's concept of the 'autonomous working class' and expressing the Situationist belief that the establishment had 'tried to make us mere functions of the production process' (Carr 2010: 86). Despite a shared commitment to the destabilisation of the traditional status quo, the mainstream protest movement's rejection of the Angry Brigade provided a final dismissal to militant situationism as an organising principle of Marxist activism moving forward into the mid-1970s.

Literature review

As a leftist political movement that struggled to achieve widespread support beyond its infancy, it is important to contextualise situationism within the broader spectrum of Marxist ideology. As in the case of more conventional forms of Marxism, the basic tenets of libertarian Marxism can be traced to the theories espoused by Marx and Engels in the mid-to-late 19th century. Unpublished until 56 years after Marx's death, *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Okonomie* (*Fundamentals of Political Economy Criticism*) is considered one of the formative texts in the libertarian strand of Marxism – its assertion that the working classes did not require the intervention of a revolutionary party or government to achieve liberty and sovereignty. Marx (1993) also pre-empts the Situationist viewpoint in regards to the individual in *Grundrisse*, arguing that 'any society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of relationships [and] conditions that the individual actor is forming' (p. 176). Debord (2002) credits Marx with having 'demolished Hegel's position of detachment from events, as well as passive contemplation by any supreme external agency whatsoever' (p. 22); as reducing levels of detachment within the proletariat is a key element of situationism, it could be argued that Debord's crediting of Marx in this respect ultimately allows the philosophy to be considered an offshoot of Marxism. Though he gives Marx credit for conceptualising many of the basic tenets that underpin situationism, Debord also notes the weaknesses of Marxism when taken at face value. He claims that the initial failures of Marxism were 'naturally linked to the weakness of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat of his time', going on to imply that the primary objectives of Marxism could be more successful in a context that was primed for revolutionary action (Debord 2002: 24).

A range of prominent theorists would go on to build upon Marx and Engels' work in the development of libertarian Marxism such as György Lukács, Karl Korsch and Daniel Guerin. Each of these theorists was influential in the cultivation of the Situationist philosophy, particularly in relation to their focus on 'the need for workers and citizens to democratically control every realm of their life from the factory to the community' (Best & Kellner 1997: 82); although situationism could not be classified as a form of council communism in itself, the tenets of this early 20th-century ideology provide a clear basis for the libertarian approach taken by Debord and his colleagues. In a 1969 defence of libertarian Marxism, Guerin defined the libertarian Marxist as 'not an academic but a militant … well aware that it is up to him to change the world – no more, no less' (Guerin 1969: para 17). Lukács also produced a degree of theoretical contribution that would be incorporated into the later development of situationism in his discussion of the impact of materialism on human consciousness. He identified the fallacy that 'it is not men's consciousness that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness' (Lukács 1968: 18). By highlighting the role of society in shaping individual perceptions as an element of libertarian Marxism, Lukács effectively foreshadowed its more thorough development as an organising principle of the Situationist movement in the mid-20th century. Although acknowledging Lukács' 'profound' theoretical contribution to the concept of the Spectacle, Debord repudiates the application of these concepts to mainstream Bolshevism; he labels Lukács an 'ideologue' that had unduly given the Bolshevik regime credit as disruptors of the Spectacle rather than having 'only one very specific and limited task: the seizure of state power' (Debord 2002: 33). As can be seen, Debord considered Lukács highly influential, albeit misguided in his application of a proto-situationist philosophy that would contribute to paving the way for the incarnation favoured by Debord several decades later.

Given that situationism is a sociopolitical philosophy that was developed primarily by artists and intellectuals, there exists a considerable range of scholarly material that serves to outline the principles of the belief system in considerable detail. Due to the fact that he was either the sole author or a contributor to the majority of seminal Situationist texts, Debord's influence on the Situationist perspective is of particular significance. After the merger of the Lettrist International with the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the London Psychogeographical Association (LPA) in mid-1957, Debord was chosen to articulate the views of the newly formed Situationist International in the manifesto *Report on the Construction of Situations.* It is in this initial Situationist missive that Debord notes the 'contradictions of the bourgeoisie … that while it respects the abstract principle of intellectual and artistic creation, it resists actual creations when they first appear, then eventually exploits them' (McDonough 2004: 31). Debord's manifesto firmly establishes situationism as a revolutionary movement dedicated to the complete overhaul of existing sociocultural structures and systems; he asserts that 'the crisis of modern culture has led to total ideological decomposition [and] nothing new can be built on these ruins' (McDonough 2004: 37). The *Report on the Construction of Situations* clearly expresses the fundamental concepts underpinning the Situationist philosophy and provides key insights into its relationship with the broader school of libertarian Marxism.

Aside from Debord's original *Report on the Construction of Situations*, the principles of situationism are largely informed by two additional texts published by prominent members

of the Situationist International. Debord's work in the development of situationism was prolific throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, with the publication *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 serving to further develop the concepts initially espoused in the group's 1957 manifesto. Conceiving the concept of the Spectacle could be considered Debord's most significant contribution to Marxist theory and the field of epistemological study on the whole. Debord's belief that reality as experienced by most people was an artificial construct formed the basis for later Situationist thought; it charged the mass media and the establishment that controlled it with destroying 'the boundaries between true and false by repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organisation of appearance' (Debord 2002: 57).

Although *The Society of the Spectacle* was highly influential in Situationist philosophy, it was not the only core text of the movement released in 1967: Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* further expanded upon the interaction between people, material objects and their physical environment. It was Vaneigem's contention that 'purchasing power is a licence to purchase power' and that advanced capitalism had reached a stage wherein the ordinary person sold their labour solely 'to buy objects to distinguish himself in the social hierarchy' (Vaneigem 1967: 55). Vaneigem (1967) asserted that the pervasive nature of consumerism was responsible for a general malaise within the working classes and rallied against 'a world in which the guarantee that we will not die of starvation has been purchased with the guarantee that we will die of boredom' (p. 4). Vaneigem's treatise heavily supported the process of creating 'situations' to escape the confines placed upon the individual by the pressures of the mass media and the capitalist establishment; in this sense, Vaneigem's work supported the contentions made by Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* and contributed to the foundation of a consolidated Situationist philosophy.

While the Situationist International did not exist as an active organisation after its dissolution in 1972, the movement and its central philosophy have continued to be an area of interest that has been explored in depth in subsequent literary material. One of the most thorough renderings of the Situationist ethos in the modern era is provided in Plant's *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. Noting the 'scarcity of serious discussion' around the Situationist philosophy in scholarly analysis, Plant (1992) suggests that 'Situationist texts make for uncomfortable reading anyone with an interest in the maintenance of the status quo' (p. 4). The dearth of academic analysis of situationism is echoed by Ball (1987), who claims that constructing a 'historical representation [of Situationists] may be more onerous in view of the fact that so few critical writings have gathered around the Situationist International' (p. 21).

Interestingly, Plant and Ball suggest that the absence of scholarly analysis of situationism may be the result of a concerted effort on the part of the movement itself. Plant (1992) claims that 'what has really written the Situationists out of intellectual history is their own determination to avoid recuperation within existing channels of dissent and critical theory' (p. 4), whereas Ball (1987) notes the influence of Hegel on Situationist thought in the sense that the movement's organisers were well aware of 'the process by which historical actors undertake a project whose consequences result in something completely different from their intentions' (p. 21). Compared to other variations of Marxist philosophy, there is far less material available that serves to evaluate situationism; nevertheless, Plant (1992) argues that 'the Situationist International has been ignored by its detractors and protected by those attracted to it for too long … there is no longer

any damage to be done to its ideas' by applying them in a contemporary context (p. ix). As a result, it can be assumed that the cache of material analysing and evaluating Situationist theory will continue to increase as concerns over the possibility of recuperation begin to diminish.

Despite the fact that it is not a direct application of Situationist philosophy in a postmodern context, the notion of the 'post-truth era' bears a range of similarities to the concept of the Spectacle as defined by Debord in 1967. Referred to in a limited fashion throughout the 1990s, the term 'post-truth era' was largely popularised by Keyes (2004) in *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life.* Keyes' book suggests that deception and dishonesty had become intrinsic to American life and permeated every aspect from the mass media to direct interpersonal communication; the suggestion that a third category of ambiguous facts exists between truth and falsehood reinforces the idea that an individual's perception of reality can be shaped by way of manipulation and deceit. Keyes' proposition of a post-truth era was further consolidated by Harsin (2015) in his theory of a 'regime of post-truth' – a concept that builds on Foucault's regimes of truth; Harsin's regimes of post-truth recognise the fragmented media landscape that has developed as a result of social media diffusion and the 24-hour news cycle. Harsin suggests that the proliferation of ideologically oriented news sources has led to 'truth games [that] seek only partly to appeal to conviction within ideological filter bubbles'; rather than reporting the facts accurately and objectively, Harsin (2015) claims that 'the goals of various actors also appear to be about occupying the field of perception, the attention economy, to induce and manage participation in a way that collapses politics' (p. 331). Harsin's definition of the regime of post-truth bears considerable similarities to the discussion of the Spectacle in Debord's 1967 treatise of situationism, and it is clear that the impact of mass media on society's relationship with reality continues to be an area of considerable academic interest.

Discussion

Regimes of post-truth and the politics of deception

Central to the rise of the post-truth era is the role played by the mass media in shaping reality as it is experienced by the general population. It is Harsin's contention that the fragmented nature of the modern media landscape allows for a plurality of perspectives that fundamentally prevents a single, unified truth being agreed to and disseminated among a passive population. If Harsin's position on the failure of the regime of truth is to be accepted, it follows that his argument in favour of a post-truth era also serves as a dismissal of the Spectacle, and an argument that the Situationist goal of disrupting the mediated version of reality has been achieved. Harsin goes further in identifying a typology of individuals that he refers to as 'Debunkers': he argues that 'as truth claims proliferate across fragmented networks, so, too, do upright citizen debunkers and entire organisations, which can never suture fragmentation … and certainly cannot endure temporally' (Harsin 2015: 331). It appears that, even within the post-Spectacle environment of the fragmented media, there exists a cohort of consumers who have adopted the Situationist methodology of rejecting agreed upon sociocultural narratives. Harsin's Debunkers act as a form of Neo-Situationist, operating in the aftermath of the collapse

of the Spectacle and dedicated to the ongoing destabilisation and disavowal of a reality imposed by the capitalist establishment.

Despite the argument that the Situationist philosophy has been realised in the post-truth era, several conditions of the newly fragmented media environment suggest that capitalist interests continue to exert considerable influence in a reconstitution and recalibration of the Spectacle. Amoore highlights the fact that, in a digitally oriented environment, 'algorithms precisely function as a means of directing and disciplining attention, focusing on specific points and cancelling out all other data' (Beer 2013: 86). Harsin agrees, drawing a direct correlation between the capitalist establishment and its use of algorithms to specifically target consumers. He argues that this form of data-driven marketing 'has become "the corporation's soul" and a primary form of social control' (Harsin 2015: 330). Curran et al. (2016) assert that, far from having a democratising effect on the modern media landscape, the fragmentation of information streams that has taken shape in the post-truth era 'is all too often incorporated within a system of commodity exchange controlled by existing elites who either call for user-generated material or cull material from already existing sites' (p. 107). Using targeted data-analytics to assist in the construction of a consumer's social media platform, the owners of said platforms exert a significant control in shaping the reality experienced by that individual. It is misleading, thus, to suggest that the Internet is a democratised space that reflects the conditions of the post-truth era. By giving the impression that a user has access to a range of news sources, there is a suggestion that the influence of the Spectacle of mass media can be avoided; instead, the use of predictive data in the filtering of these news sources creates a circumstance in which a user's reality is unwittingly shaped by the capitalist interests in control of web-based platforms.

Fake news and undermining the Spectacle in the Trump era

While the data-driven filtering of the information that is included in a user's social media news stream is a significant element in the argument that a reconstituted Spectacle continues to influence the consumerist population, the recent rise of the 'fake news' phenomenon provides an even more egregious example of the ways in which new media shapes perceptions of reality in the post-truth era. Previously used as a means of describing the satirical news productions that gained popularity in the mainstream media in the early 21st century, the concept of fake news attracted a less benign connotation in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election. Rather than referring to satirical material, fake news came to refer to the trend of Internet-based publications purporting to be genuine news sources knowingly propagating inaccurate stories based on rumour or blatant untruths (Bandurski 2008). Gottfried and Shearer (2016) found that, in the lead up to the election in November 2016, around 62% of American adults obtained their news from social media; given that the most popular fake news stories during this period were shared more widely than the most popular mainstream media reports, the impact of fake news on the construction of a post-truth media consumer's reality is profound. Unlike its satirical forebears, the variation of fake news that developed during the 2016 election cycle had a notable tangible impact on events in the real world: a shooting incident at a pizza restaurant in Washington, DC, was motivated by a conspiracy theory disseminated via the medium, while a number of academics suggest that Donald Trump 'would not have been elected president if not for the influence of fake news' (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017: 212).

An argument could be made that the influence of fake news on contemporary society in itself supports the existence of a newly revitalised Spectacle in the post-truth era. Despite the fragmentation of information streams seemingly disrupting the control of the mass media apparatus, the ability of diverse media sources to propagate untruths and erroneously shape the perception of reality experienced by consumers is at a zenith. Of more interest, however, is the reaction to the fake news phenomenon that has arisen from within the traditional political establishment. There is no individual that has popularised the concept of fake news quite as much as US President Donald Trump: the belief that he would not have been elected without the support of this genre of media aside, Trump's predilection for labelling traditional mass media outlets as fake news for publishing or broadcasting reports that he disagrees with has become synonymous with his short tenure as commander-in-chief (Weber 2017). By taking ownership of the concept of fake news and recasting it to suit his anti-establishment agenda, Trump has essentially undermined the very notion of truth and reality in the modern era. From a Situationist perspective, Trump is not inaccurate in referring to mass media organisations such as CNN or *The New York Times* as fake news: adherents of Debord and Vaneigem would argue that the construction of reality portrayed via these sources are just as artificial as those presented in other fake news publications and are more impactful in their contribution to the establishment of the Spectacle due to a wider reaching audience of passive consumers (Compton 2004).

While it does not appear that Trump actively identifies with the Situationist philosophy, his disavowal of the mainstream media gives the suggestion that he accedes to several of the fundamental principles of the Marxist philosophy. Trump's use of the fake news terms provokes the general public to question the source of their information whether it be from CNN or a YouTube channel; if the scepticism of the mass media was the only by-product of Trump's actions, it would certainly be possible to cast the president as a neo-Situationist. To do so, however, would be to ignore Trump's position as a central figure within the sociopolitical establishment. Even prior to his accession to the presidency, Trump was an entrenched member of the capitalist elite through his position as a corporate tycoon and reality television personality; his foray into the highest level of politics has only served to consolidate his existing position as an establishment figure and provided him with greater power to shape the sociocultural narrative of reality. Trump's rejection of criticism as fake news thereby serves as a tool designed to reinforce his carefully crafted identity within the Spectacle: it allows the president to assert the contradiction that he is a renegade, anti-establishment figure despite his existing public persona as an authoritarian capitalist (Fuchs 2017). Trump's critique of the mass media should be perceived, therefore, not as a repudiation of the Spectacle in contemporary society; instead, it should be considered as an act purposefully designed to contribute to his erroneous portrayal as an anti-establishment figure and reinforce his position as a central member of the American sociopolitical milieu.

Psychogeography in application to regional Trump support

If it is accepted that Trump's reconstruction of reality and dismissal of the mainstream media serves as a form of reconstituted Spectacle, it must also hold that other aspects of Debord's Situationist theory could be applied to the contemporary post-truth era. Another central element of the Spectacle as proposed by Debord is the belief that psychogeography

operates in such a way that the emotional resonance of certain areas contributes to the repression of residents who find themselves incapable of transcending these artificial physical boundaries (Bonnett 1989). It was Debord's contention that this form of the Spectacle primarily consisted of a breakdown in the traditional dichotomy between the city-based urban lifestyle and that of the rural countryside: he argued that the process of city planning was a tool that was specifically used as 'capitalism's method for taking over the natural and human environment … it is the very technology of separation' (Debord 2002: 46). According to Debord's understanding of psychogeography, unrestricted urbanism posed a significant threat to the maintenance of the Spectacle by 'safeguarding class power by atomizing workers who have been dangerously brought together by the conditions of urban production' (Debord 2002: 47). It was for this reason that it was in the best interests of the controlling elite to force an artificial dispersion of the population to prevent the formation of class-oriented collectives that could effectively challenge the capitalist status quo; this resulted in a system of urban sprawl that dispersed the proletariat across an area vast enough that they would be 'prevented … from undertaking independent action and becoming a creative historical force' (Debord 2002: 47).

Debord's description of these artificial *pseudocountrysides* is highly reminiscent of the regional areas of the modern United States from which Trump has traditionally derived a significant level of support. From his time as a candidate for the Republican nomination to his current tenure as president, Trump has enjoyed consistent support from rural or regional areas of the country that far outstrips his support in major urban centres. He has maintained this level of support through the construction of a narrative based on the concept that middle America had been ignored and 'forgotten' by previous presidential administrations, resulting in economic hardship and a deficiency in the basic infrastructure that is expected in a developed nation (White 2016). Drawing upon the antipathy of those residing in these *pseudocountrysides* towards the political establishment that was perceived to have failed them, the Trump campaign was cast as a revolutionary movement against 'politics as usual' and purposefully portrayed itself as a champion of a deprived, rural proletariat. Foregrounding a commitment to this significant subpopulation of the American public could thereby be perceived as another case of Trump's rejection of the Spectacle and a purported desire to invest power in the working classes rather than the capitalist establishment in urban centres of New York City or Los Angeles (Stoetzer et al. 2017). Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept the assertion that Trump has served as the figurehead of a revolutionary proletariat movement. To do so, it would be necessary to ignore Trump's sympathies towards corporate interests and the fundamental iconography of his persona as an avatar of advanced capitalism.

Deconstruction of the methods by which Trump has been able to co-opt the resistance of the regional United States to support his campaign for the presidency begins in the discussion of *pseudocountrysides* found in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. In his examination of the role of psychogeography on the human condition, Debord (2002) suggests that 'the incipient disappearance of city and country does not represent a transcendence of their separation, but their simultaneous collapse' (p. 47); he asserts that 'the dictatorship of the automobile' had made the isolation of the proletariat a relatively simple process that had 'left its mark on the landscape with the dominance of freeways, which tear up the old urban centres and promote an ever-wider dispersal' (Debord 2002:

47). Debord's description of isolated regional communities that are connected, yet separated, by expansive freeway systems could be easily seen to reflect the circumstances of modern America. The impact of this separation in a contemporary context could also be seen as a vindication of Debord's perspective: the concept that isolation of the proletariat leads to a resistance to progressive sociopolitical views is reflected in contemporary America, in which regional areas have conventionally proven to be more conservative and resistant to change than their urban counterparts (Sundquist 2011). Given that Debord has proven correct in his assertion that separation of the working classes results in higher levels of conservatism, it is clear that isolation and separation are essential factors in repressing dissent and preventing the organisation of the proletariat. It is unclear, therefore, how the anti-establishment movement led by Trump was able to mobilise support at the level it did. If the result of the creation of a *pseudocountryside* is to repress actions that would disrupt the status quo, the success of the Trump campaign must be considered either a repudiation of the Situationist concept of psychogeography or, alternatively, an anomalous event in the history of social movements.

Recuperation of the anti-establishment movement in the Trump era

While there are several potential explanations for Trump's appeal to the regional American subpopulation, perhaps the most reasonable is the suggestion that his campaign did not constitute a revolutionary movement under the same definition as that used by Debord. Although it was made explicit that the central goal of the Trump campaign was to 'drain the swamp' of the American political establishment and assert the power of the proletariat, there is little to suggest that it advocated in favour of direct action and mass mobilisation of the kind adopted by the Situationist International in the 1960s and early 1970s (Franks 2003). Rather than constituting a 'revolutionary movement' like that which took place in France in 1968, the isolation and separation of the regional proletariat in the United States made them particularly vulnerable to the impact of the Spectacle as it was constructed by the Trump campaign. Successfully conveying the narrative that Trump was a defender of the working classes allowed the regional proletariat to accept his legitimacy as a political candidate and offer their support for his message without resorting to a form of direct action that would serve to destabilise the prevailing capitalist system. By accepting that significant anti-establishment sentiment existed within the *pseudocountryside* of regional America, it was possible for the Trump campaign to engage in the creation of a Spectacle based on a thematic direction that reflected the perspective of many potential voters (Debord 2002: 48); it is this form of recuperation that allowed Trump to direct anti-establishment sentiment in such a way that did not threaten the position of the current establishment in any meaningful or enduring way.

   Recuperation plays a significant role in the Situationist philosophy and is a particularly important element of the Situationist belief in the power of the Spectacle to neutralise popular dissent against the ruling elite. Several aspects of the anti-establishment movement led by the Trump campaign give the impression that it is a prime example of recuperation rather than revolution. Trump's movement was predicated largely on the idea that the prevailing political establishment had marginalised the White working

classes and effectively ignored their specific needs in the governance of the United States; it was the stated goal of the campaign to reassert the democratisation of public discourse and ensure that no perspectives were neglected at the expense of others (White 2016). Despite this goal being professed throughout the 2016 election campaign, Trump used his position as presidential candidate on a number of occasions to silence critics: it was commonplace for Trump to encourage supporters to use physical violence against ideological opponents, signalling a zero tolerance approach towards dissent that was fundamentally at odds with his stated goal to democratise sociopolitical discourse. This was just one of the ways in which Trump's actions contradicted the principles of the movement that he was ostensibly the leader of. As the nominee of the Republican Party, a considerable level of Trump's support came from those that held conservative political views. Previously seen as a liberal or, at most, a moderate political figure, Trump adopted many of the conservative views of his party regardless of his previously stated position (Heaney 2017). Although this may be perceived as understandable given his role as a representative of the Republican Party, it could be considered that Trump actively engaged in recuperation of the conservative movement in an effort to garner the support necessary to obtain the Republican nomination and further his own ambitions to become President of the United States.

A major aspect of the recuperation process as identified by Debord is the trivialisation and commodification of a movement; to commodify attributes that were previously considered to be radical ideas acts to mitigate their impact and effectively neutralise their potential to be used against the capitalist establishment (McDonough 2004). Commodification of the Trump movement occurred throughout the campaign, regardless of its persistent characterisation as a grassroots campaign driven by the disenfranchised working classes. A highly visible expression of this recuperation process was the 'Make America Great Again' slogan printed in white text on red baseball caps, which were widely worn by Trump supporters and became a ubiquitous symbol of association with the anti-establishment movement. Although the mass production of apparel bearing the slogans of a political campaign is a common element of modern elections, the 'Make America Great Again' baseball cap transcended its role as mere apparel and became a symbolic representation of the movement itself (Penney 2017). By appropriating the goals of the anti-establishment movement – that being to legitimately 'Make America Great Again' – and transforming these sentiments into a catchcry affiliated with its campaign, the Trump movement engaged in the kind of recuperation that Debord suggested was designed to counteract the potential impact of a legitimate social movement. Trump's commodification of his own identity began long before the commencement of his political career; however, in the business world, the 'Trump' brand of hotels, resorts and casinos had enjoyed a long-standing association with opulence and aspirational wealth that was incorporated and itself recuperated into the Trump presidential campaign (Kolodny 2016). Trump was effective in establishing an association between his existing reputation for wealth and his stated goal to 'Make America Great Again'; by conflating the two concepts with each other, Trump could be seen to have successfully recuperated the anti-establishment message and neutralised it by inextricably linking the campaign's goals with his own personal identity.

By taking responsibility for single-handedly pursuing the goal of making America great again, Trump assumes the role described by Debord as the 'agent of the spectacle'. Debord

(2002) suggests that these agents 'must possess the full range of admired human qualities; official differences between them are thus cancelled out by the official similarity implied by their supposed excellence in every field of endeavour' (p. 17). Focusing on his own financial achievements in the business world, Trump cultivated the impression of excellence that is required of an agent of the Spectacle; he consolidated this position by exacerbating existing fractures within American society to create an ideological separation akin to the physical isolation created by way of the *pseudocountryside*. Debord (2002) asserted that, in these circumstances, 'fallacious archaic oppositions are revived – regionalisms and racisms which serve to endow mundane rankings in the hierarchies of consumption with a magical ontological superiority' (pp. 17–18). Despite the fact that it was articulated in the late 1960s, this description clearly reflects Trump's appropriation of wedge politics to divide subsections of the American population throughout his political career. While not a recuperation of a radical movement, this recuperation of prejudicial discourse has served to reinforce his position as a leading political figure and agent of the Spectacle.

Conclusion

As a form of libertarian Marxism, the Situationist philosophy enjoyed a level of popularity for only a relatively short period of time from the late 1950s until the early 1970s. Despite the fact that it did not achieve its stated goal of reshaping the systems and structures of capitalist society, the ideological impact of situationism was bolstered by the ways in which accomplished conceptual philosophers such as Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem were able to express the perspective of the Situationist International in a clear and convincing manner. The idea of the Spectacle was of particular note within the Situationist discourse, providing a Marxist paradigm through which it was possible to critically analyse the state of advanced capitalism and account for the role of the mass media in shaping reality and repressing a powerful-yet-passive proletariat. It was the Situationist belief in the threat of recuperation that had the most significant impact on its ideological legacy; however, given the Situationist perspective that sociopolitical movements were vulnerable to commodification and trivialisation under the conditions of advanced capitalism, many adherents of the philosophy have been reluctant to apply its tenets to modern context in fear that it would lead to a recuperation or 'watering down' of situationism itself. Nevertheless, in a period of history that is increasingly becoming known as the 'post-truth era', it is essential to revisit the concepts espoused by the Situationist International to develop a greater appreciation for the current sociopolitical landscape.

To a considerable extent, the presidency of Donald Trump is reflective of the zenith of the post-truth era: Trump's consistent disavowal of reputable media organisations as 'fake news' gives the appearance of a politician who actively rejects the Spectacle of mass communication that Debord claims was designed to prop up the capitalist establishment. On closer examination, however, it appears that the anti-establishment sentiments propagated by Trump instead serve as a kind of reconstituted Spectacle; in this neo-Spectacle, anti-establishment rhetoric has been recuperated by the movement led by Trump as a means of commodifying its message and trivialising its impact to secure the position of advanced capitalism in contemporary society. As an individual that has built

his entire public persona on the excesses of capitalist wealth, Trump serves as an unlikely figurehead for the regional American proletariat that he purports to represent. Even so, the construction of a neo-Spectacle in which Trump exists apart from the establishment has allowed him to accrue the support of this demographic through a combination of ideological recuperation and psychogeographical conditions. Regardless of whether Trump ultimately succeeds in the role of American president, it is clear that the foundation of a neo-Spectacle has been a key element of his consolidation of power in a way that fundamentally validates the philosophy of the Situationist movement almost half a century after its short-lived peak of popularity came to its conclusion.

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