chapter 13

Strategy and Tactics in the Integrated Spectacle

The ‘Theory of Historical Action’

In his complex autobiographical book *Panegyric*, Debord makes the following remark: ‘I have been very interested in war’, he writes, ‘in the theoreticians of its strategy, but also in reminiscences of battles and in the countless other disruptions history mentions, surface eddies on the river of time.’\(^1\) Strategy and military theory were in fact sources of great interest for Debord throughout his life. This enthusiasm even led to the creation of a military board game, which Debord named the *Kriegspiel* (he seems to have mistakenly dropped the additional ‘s’ of the German term). This game was intended to illustrate the essential principles of Clausewitzian warfare, and its long period of gestation perhaps serves to illustrate the depth and longevity of Debord’s interest in war. He had conceived a version of this game by 1956,\(^2\) and had devised it by 1958.\(^3\) It was then patented in 1965, developed in 1976, and it appeared in French in 1987. The game’s publication in English in 2007 has since done a great deal to foster Anglophone recognition of this previously neglected side of Debord’s thought.

That recognition, however, is not without limitations. Although there is now far more commentary on Debord’s interest in strategy, much of it is hampered by the fact that he never presented his views on the topic as a discrete, coherent doctrine or set of ideas. The man who once declared ‘I will never give explanations’\(^4\) thus remains true to form. There are good reasons for Debord’s reticence in this regard, as we will see below, but the fact remains that because Debord’s understanding of strategy is not fully described, and is instead only evidenced through its application in his works and actions, the actual nature of his views on the topic can become somewhat mysterious. In

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\(^1\) Debord 2004b, p. 55; 2006b, p. 1679.
\(^2\) Debord 2006b, p. 285.
\(^3\) Debord’s archived reading notes include a quotation from General Jean-Lambert-Alphonse Colin, which reads: ‘Finally, from 1848 on, the game of war, the “Kriegsspiel”, manoeuvres between two sides on the map, began to develop’. Debord wrote in the margin: ‘and mine, from 1958’ (Bibliothèque nationale, NAF28623; Notes de lecture; Stratégie, histoire militaire; box 1; dossier 2; Colin, *Les grandes batailles de l’histoire*. The note was written after 1964).
\(^4\) Debord 2006b, p. 70. The line is taken from a ‘clarification’ of his *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, directed at the French Federation of Film Clubs.
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consequence, Debord’s interest in strategy has sometimes been viewed as if it were somehow removed from the rest of his theoretical work, or even reduced to a mere personal quirk or character flaw. We should therefore note, first of all, that it was not a mere personal idiosyncrasy, but was instead treated very seriously indeed, particularly after 1968 and the dissolution of the SI in 1972. For example, in a letter of 1974, Debord wrote as follows:

> The principal work that it appears to me should be envisaged now – as the complementary contrary to The Society of the Spectacle, which described frozen alienation (and the negation that was implicit within it) – is the theory of historical action. This means to bring forth, in its moment, which has come, strategic theory. At this stage – and to speak schematically here – the foundational theoreticians to retrieve and develop are not so much Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont, but Thucydides – Machiavelli – Clausewitz.6

This did not mean that Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont were to be simply replaced by Thucydides, Machiavelli and Clausewitz. Instead, Debord’s point is that the ideas that he and the SI had drawn from the former trio of writers now needed to be expanded via the lessons that might be learned from the latter three. As Debord indicates in his personal notes, he viewed Thucydides, Machiavelli and Clausewitz as theoreticians of historical action; and as we have indicated in the previous chapters of this book, such action, for Debord, is precisely what the ‘frozen alienation’ of spectacle denies. Therefore, the ‘strategic theory’ that Debord speaks of here must not be seen as a replacement of the Hegelian Marxism that he and the SI had developed in the 1960s, but rather as its extension and augmentation.

We are, however, still left with the problem of understanding quite what Debord’s ‘theory of historical action’ actually was. This seems pertinent, because academia’s increased awareness of Debord’s interest in strategy, when

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5 This is by no means an entirely new phenomenon. In Panegyric, Debord recalls an article from 1972 that described him as ‘a kind of cool chess player’ engaged in ‘manoeuvring his acolytes like naïve pawns’ (Debord 2004b, p. 48; 2006b, p. 1677).


7 ‘Thucydides is not a philosopher or a historian, but a theoretician of action; a theoretician of general strategy. It is effectively the same with Machiavelli. Clausewitz is not a historian of war, but a theoretician of strategy considered in its pure domain: war’ (Bibliothèque nationale, NAF28603; Notes de lecture; Stratégie, histoire militaire; box 2; dossier 5; ‘Strat’; the note was written after 1964).