What *is* Situation Analysis?

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To ask what 'situation analysis' *is* - to point out from the outset - is really to ask a premature question. However, such a predicament need not undermine a definition, at least not if the very matter of its temporality can play an important role in offering adequate response. Of course, since a full or final account is not always *immediately* available in the time in which one is required to speak, I have often found myself needing to offer a short explanation of the phrase. In such a case, I would resort to a more literal or practical answer to the question, one that accounts for the current usage of the term. There is then a 'reality' of *Situation Analysis* that can be advanced here, a particular version, or vision of analysis; and this has a particular - if as yet short - biography that reveals some specific details of intention, expectation and limitation. However, as will be discussed further on, the phrase is by no means new; and so in one sense, it might be more usual to ask what situation analysis *was*, rather than determine its present and future tense with a question of 'what is'. It is of course clear that any straightforward adoption of this 'historical' mode of critique would be far from appropriate today, at least not without rigorous re-examination. Equally however, that there is a heritage to draw upon marks an important point, in fact, its resonance in critical discourse bears an inheritance that cannot be ignored. It soon becomes apparent then, that both accounts, long and short, are inter-dependent. There can be no future without its past.

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Situation Analysis is the collective name for a discussion group that takes as its set of shared interests, concerns of the news media, international events and affairs, and a consideration of the role and scope of their theoretical and critical analysis. Due to the fact that the founders are all members of the Postgraduate School of Critical Theory and

Cultural Studies (University of Nottingham), the initial manner of both the group and the journal was always going to be primarily academic. However a desire to transcend university boundaries remains a core concern of the group; indeed, the wish to bring together theorists and practitioners from all sorts of disciplines, professions and affiliations was, from the outset, deemed not just of real interest, but very necessary. It is certainly not an easy task to define the relationship a university establishment has with respect to a wider public or community; however, it has been an underlying belief of the group members that a strain of anti-intellectualism runs through much discourse and cultural activity in the UK, both inside and outside the university setting. One hope of the group has been to secure a new space open for intelligent debate - or 'occasion' for the exchange of ideas and analysis that it is felt is all too often missing, or at least eroded.

More specifically, the desire to establish a regular and robust forum of debate sprang from feelings of anxiety, frustration and even impotence following the spectacularly devastating events of September 11th. The newly formed group was not, necessarily, to meet solely to discuss those recent events in America, but indeed sought to draw together to consider a wide range of international current affairs, including those affairs not necessarily afforded 'significant' currency. Nevertheless, it was perhaps all too inevitable that for sometime we would be consumed by the coverage of the 'War On Terrorism', especially as it became clearer to what extent it was to frame a host of politically tense and trying global 'situations'. From the start then tension can be understood to exist between establishing a group with clear interests and aims, and one that is left open to the events of the day, to what is still to come.

In that first year following September 11th, the group - it should be noted - met only rarely and sporadically; it often seemed to me that the forces that had drawn us together in the first place could never be sustained, and indeed the future of the group at times seemed less than certain. However, it did survive, and indeed strengthen, particularly with the decision to put together a journal, bearing the name of the group. By October 2002, matters were established more formally – *Situation Analysis: a forum for critical thought & international current affairs,* a project with the declared aim of providing a forum for debate and dialogue regarding critical theory and world events, thereby encouraging an examination, interrogation, and experimentation with the scope and relation of theory and critique to international current affairs; its principal driving-force being to return a sense of urgency and immediacy to the 'work' of theory and critical thought. *Situation Analysis,* then, as a journal, can be understood (at least in aspiration) to serve as a focus and link, keeping together the more extensive and on-going practice of debate and enquiry between a wide-range of interested and committed individuals and parties.

It is perhaps difficult to see the development of a group and journal such as this as anything outside of the terms of 'communicative action' – a notion Habermas develops to mean a form of interpersonal communication that, taking place aside from the strategic systems of power and commerce, seeks to determine a sense of shared comprehension and action. It is upon the sense of openness, comprehension and sincerity, that claims to 'truth' can be validated, or at least held firm by consensus. And indeed such consensus is open to further modification through argument and debate, making it, at least theoretically, possible to reach a 'final' consensual agreement. Of course, even if such potential is accepted, it is quite a different matter of how such consensus finds its way into action, how ideas and 'talk' translate into change. Although, it might at least be a start to consider

change to have occurred amongst those few talking, as they re-establish themselves alongside one another.

The very notion of communicative action – for better or worse – certainly lies at the heart of all journal publications, and the frequency of new journals now appearing, in all manner of varieties and sectors, is surely good indication of a commitment to the on-going process of open debate. And indeed, a number of journals are quite vocal about their intentions and aspirations. A particularly striking illustration of this can be given with the ambitious, and (at the time) genuinely innovative publication that appeared late in 1989 under the direction of Pierre Bourdieu. *Liber* was esstentially a literary review supplement, but with the added dimension of aspiring to represent 'European' interest and dialogue. It collated articles from academics across Europe, all published in translation in French, German, English, Italian and Spanish, and disseminated in the form of free supplements with five national publications (*Le Monde,* the *Times Literary Supplement,* the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, L'Indice* and *El País*). The degree of hope and energy – rarely located in the majority of academic output – is clearly established in the first issue, with it spelling out the desire to offer:

> writers and scholars a forum in which they can explain and debate freely, and as accessibly as possible, intellectual problems which are of general concern […] Experts must be encouraged to go beyond the compartmentaliszation of knowledge and apply their skills to the major problems of the day, or of every day, which are so often left to the unconsidered improvisations of non-specialists.

An excellent account of the development (and all too inevitable demise) of *Liber* can be found in an article by Peter Collier.[1] As he notes, its inception, though planned for well over a year, happened to coincide with the events of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and 'the arrival of a new European era, where people and ideas would circulate freely again'. Its full title, *Liber - Revue européenne des livres*, brought together both liberty and literature, ultimately expressing, as Collier points out, 'a belief in the power of the book to liberate'. What actually materialised from the initial idea of this periodical is difficult to assess. Issues would be announced and then not arrive, or arrive late. The intention to publish concurrent translations was complicated by the mode of distribution, with it being a supplement of established periodicals; each with their own publication deadlines and agendas. And, of course, aside from the obvious cultural differences of its readership, reception was dramatically different in the various countries due to the different reading contexts.

Liber was certainly ambitious and optimistic in its scope and design, as it was equally fraught with problems and contradictions. What quickly came to mind for me, in reading Collier's account, was the realisation that this periodical was set up prior to the real developments of the World Wide Web, with its obvious growing 'online' community. It is perhaps the case, that the scattered nature of *Liber,* in content and form, may have well suited the 'mechanics' of the Internet. Naturally, concerns over access to the Internet are still open to interpretation, and regarding this, the founders of *Situation Analysis* have been wary of relying solely upon an online forum. However it would seem more and more that the Internet does provide genuine solutions to the various pitfalls of publishing. And, certainly, many of the economic and technical difficulties specific to *Liber*, such as

distribution and formatting, would no doubt have better been resolved by an e-journal platform.

To take another more recent example, then, the journal *Theory & Event*, established in 1997, has fully embraced the electronic format. Indeed it understands the online context as being vital to the aims and purpose of its publication, suggesting 'an electronic journal with an international staff, authors and readership, is a forum appropriate to the contemporary conditions of political life'. One particular concern for its editorial board is to counteract the problems beset by journal titles, which as most would agree, is the failure 'to respond effectively to the events and circumstances that influence how we currently think, react, reflect and propose'. *Theory & Event* is without doubt an extremely interesting journal, well organised and well served by notable contributors. The concerns of *Situation Analysis* certainly overlap, since the relationship of theory and critical thought to events and international current affairs lies at the heart of both publications. However, it is perhaps fair to say that *Theory & Event*, despite its intentions to feature 'other forms of writings' aside from the essay format, has really stayed true to a strictly academic style journal, and concerned primarily with '*theoretical* interventions, interpretations, and celebrations of events, institutions, cultures, and issues as they unfold.' (my emphasis).

The difficulty of improving and sustaining topicality in any journal format (regardless of different editorial process) remains. And as can be found reading over the contents of *Theory & Event* over the years, it is evident that connecting with events as and when they happen, and hoping to offer critical and insightful response, is always going to be a difficult equation. Just to take a recent example, a commentary by Alain Badiou on September 11th has just appeared in the journal (*Theory & Event* 6:2), one year on from the event itself. *Situation Analysis* is equally caught-up in this dilemma of currency, and indeed, in launching its inaugural issue one year on from the events of September 11th, is equally resigned to bringing theory to the event – or indeed theory into practice – later than might be wished for. The real commitment, then, and like *Theory & Event*, must be to collate together thoughtful and thought-provoking articles. However, a particular interest distinct to *Situation Analysis* is the very mode and manner of the media, of the channels of communication, indeed the very conditions of forum and debate. And these concerns are not so bound to any particular moment in time, any specific events. Additionally, it is important to note that *Situation Analysis* seeks to stray a little more from the academic mode. And, in this respect, it might be thought to be closer to *Liber*, which from the beginning sought to publish in different literary contexts, and actively seek an international, or at least European audience. Between journalism and journal then, *Situation Analysis* aims both to strike its own definite note, and equally to place itself suitably within a network of journals, forums, and projects that bear association and overlap. There can be no single forum, or representation; indeed, as Bourdieu notes, there is always 'the need to acknowledge and exploit a self-critical awareness of one's own position in any cultural analysis'.

Overall, it is hard to deny, for the general operation of the group and its ability to bring together a determined focus such as a journal, that a certain principle of 'communicative action' is evident, and even at stake. However, there are equally significant problems needing to be raised in response to such organisation, and directing. The standard criticism of Habermas's theory of communicative action is of course that it requires access to a determined purity of 'freedom' and rationality. Such requirement is

necessary in order to freely discuss (and know) alternative lines of argument and approaches to a problem. In the case of *Situation Analysis* however, it was soon apparent that the forces leading to setting up the group were less abstract than the theoretical responses to September 11th, which have flourished in the myriad commentaries by various intellectual luminaries. Indeed, it was the very impact of 'emotion', whether our own or that of others, upon our ability to relate to and evoke theory (and the whole tradition and premise of modes of critique) that prompted many of the key questions posed by members of the group.

We have become all too familiar with the presence of 24-hour news services, with the sheer speed of information networks to relay world events, and of course their ability to provide up to the minute updates (and even vigil). In some sense then the real 'front-line' critical engagement – the *real* generation of communicative action – is dominated by the news networks. CNN is of course the beacon and standard bearer in 'breaking the news as it happens' – its position firmly established in a collective task of analyzing the situation. And there is an incredible 'knowingness' about such news outlets, even, bizarrely, in the face - as they themselves report - of quite 'unknowable' events. The pictures that circulate become defining moments of history, images even of Instant History. Indeed it has been dramatic televised events like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War, and of course September 11th , that have heralded the apparent structural shifts that mark our recent period. But aside from these obvious examples there are daily encounters with such information that goes on unnoticed. It would of course be wrong to slip into the obvious rhetoric of passive viewing - such a notion has long ceased to be adequate. However, it is perhaps fair to say that, as partakers in the media and information networks, we are certainly brought into new awareness and dialogue in many explicit and implicit ways; if in this context there is any passivity to be spoken of, it might be understood better in terms of a certain complexity, and complicity.

A commentary by Victor Burgin is perhaps useful here.[2] Concerned with a particular recurrent television news image of a building with walls pierced by artillery, he writes that it is an image that never failed to 'pierce' him. Rather than suggest a single moment of sharp attention and realisation, Burgin wishes to bring attention to a process far less contained and isolated. Indeed, working within a psychoanalytic frame, he is interested in theorising a fluid subject, a soluble or porous subject that is neither passive nor singularly authoritative. And in this particular case he is interested in the subject as viewer before the television news. The piercing effect he writes of then, is far more akin to a 'loading' effect (as in the loading or weighing of paint upon a brush); the image comes upon the viewer, and the layers become imperceivably distinct - if only because the images do not remain upon the screen but are 'carried' about in conversations and sightings external to their initial reception. Burgin argues that this piercing effect is thus about a *growing,* accumulating tension (or anxiety) due to a subscribed need which is gained through repetition. According to such a porous and accumulating image/information economy, Burgin suggests, '[i]n the contemporary environment of mass media, particularly television, we are all of us subject to anxiety arising from, amongst other things, exposure to pain we are helpless to alleviate'. The pain exists then not simply in the content of the images we see, but in the very conditions (and gaps) of that experience of living in a world in which such images can be widely seen, repeated, and even erased. Like sediment, information gathers all around us, and the anxiety compacts – often in a numbness.

In such a scenario the very mechanisms of communicative action must be considered to have broken down, even to be totally inappropriate. We do not converse by focused response to the information around us, but rather find ourselves in strange conversations with friends, neighbours and even strangers, wondering and worrying about many things we do not really know much about.

The idea that we can at all times instinctively apply reason and insight to what we are presented daily from news information – particularly in times of extreme circumstance, or in moments of sheer surprise – is surely misguided. It would seem more convincing to suggest that we can never really be prepared *enough* to look on, think on, and engage with what is before us. Reminding ourselves of this condition though is perhaps now ever more necessary; necessary too, to make clear to ourselves that our continued anxiety and frustration with the current affairs we receive is a most ordinary experience. To lower the expectations is not necessarily to diminish affect, but perhaps even to give scope for developing greater confidence, and, more crucially, commitment to debate. If anything then, by establishing *Situation Analysis* the aim is to assert renewed hope for an 'open' space for the 'practicing' of critique: to give more 'play' to the evident anxieties, and so encourage a productive expression of what worries us in the news, what angers and frustrates us. It aims, in short, to drop the guard of all knowingness.

And it is certainly *renewed* hope that is established, since the current evocation of *Situation Analysis* does not come out of a vacuum, but is bound up with both a spoken and unspoken history. To illustrate, it is perhaps helpful to refer to the well-known anti-hero of Orwell's *1984*. When Winston Smith sits to write his diary there is a sense in which his act is an anonymous and futile one, and yet equally of monumental proportions. There is defiance in his act, making it (of sorts) a very social act. As we grouped together under the banner of *Situation Analysis*, we were – it seems to me – poised over our own (metaphorical) notebooks, ready to write something, to someone, for some reason. In that sense, the journal then establishes an important focal point for many disparate voices, as much as it hopes to provide judgement on how such constellations cohere (if indeed they do). *Situation Analysis* is then (at least in part) the work that simply needs to go on without description, even without obvious subscription. It is only with time that more can be told, just as for Winston (albeit it tragically), it was not what and when he wrote his 'small clumsy letters' that is of greatest importance, but that his words were emplaced to remind a future reader…

2

The phrase 'situation analysis' is by no means new. Jean-François Lyotard offers one specific account of it with a reminiscence of his former years engaged in a radical Marxist group, wherein, taking his turn along with his colleagues, he would seek to comprehend what is described as the 'current historical conjuncture'. In other words, he would take his turn at the perilous task known as 'situation analysis';

> That is what I used to do in the fifties and sixties when, as a militant member of the critical theory and practice institute called "Socialisme ou barbarie," it was my turn to undertake the risky exercise we called "*analyse de la situation*." After selecting the events that we considered to have prominent significance in the contemporary

> historical context, we based our analysis on them with a view to formulating an accurate picture of the world. [3]

There is surely no one today willing to offer anything comparable to 'an accurate picture of the world'; this is now – as it was surely then – an impossible task. Essentially, though, the operation of situation analysis in this particular context can be taken to describe an exercise seeking a 'broader consciousness', understanding or 'cognitive mapping' of the contemporary conditions and constraints of the world at large. And with this aspiring knowledge, the group would then seek to consider a *practice* of theory.

It perhaps needs reminding, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* had very specific and real goals. Marcel van der Linden provides an excellent history of this group,[4] and notes that the dominant associated political activity - i.e. the *practice* of theory - related to what was then a clearly delineated proletariat; and with the group predominantly considering itself 'capable of leading and co-ordinating the independent workers' struggle, directed at the conquest of state power'. Asking just 'What could be done', meant for the group, as Lyotard points out, asking radical questions of how it could 'help exploited and alienated peoples emancipate themselves from exploitation and alienation, and what kind of practice would enable [it] to realise this goal, [in the] here and now'. This at least is the position that Lyotard took up in the group at that time, being one of a number who held out with the view that a political vanguard group was valuable to, and even necessary for, any real change. There is no doubt that such a position today would be taken as highly dubious, or at very least most im*practical*. Lyotard's own reassessment of the role and (im)possibility of the task of situation analysis today - in the light of his later post-structuralist brand of philosophy - is interesting, if not novel (and shall be referred to later). However, even from the very beginnings of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the notion of defining and legitimating a vanguard was matter of much contest, and would eventually result in a stark divide between two of its leading founding members.

Socialisme ou Barbarie emerged in France in the late 1940s (well before Lyotard came to prominence), and was formalised with the advent of a journal with the same name in March 1949. This publication, as van der Linden notes, was 'a well-made periodical of one hundred pages or more', which set out the terms for the rejection of the Fourth International,[5] as well as outlining the group's position as being premised upon a perceived stark choice of only two 'remaining roads for humanity': socialism or barbarism. In a lengthy article in the first edition – written mostly by one of the most prominent thinkers and architects of the group, Cornelius Castoriadis – the 'world situation' is reflected upon, which at the time (being just after the Second World War) was understood as being divided between two 'superstates', the United States and the Soviet Union. In such a context, it is clear, the desire to look beyond the associated polarised and powerful ideologies (that go on to define the Cold War) resulted, in part at least, in the group trying to understand and locate the very mechanisms and nature of revolution itself. Indeed, an on-going concern regarded the bureaucracy of social movements, with the central question ranging over whether the fate of revolutionary movements was either always to fall way before change could be claimed, or only (with change) to change itself into a new rigid hierarchy. *Socialisme ou barbarie* wanted to ignite new forms of opposition, and crucially, in hoping to go beyond these dilemmas inherent to changing the power structure, sought to reclaim a radicalism with an on-going and lengthy 'search for a new relationship between spontaneity and organisation, between practice and theory'.

As *Socialisme ou Barbarie* developed, and with its namesake periodical consolidating, there emerged the sense of a revolutionary party opposed to the state, seeking to lead and co-ordinate the worker's struggle. Yet, it would be Castoriadis's long time colleague and rival Claude Lefort who would begin to contest such a vanguardist principle, causing tensions and disruptions to the group. In short Lefort was to emphasise a radical 'proletarian experience', a specific ontology of the 'people' (which of course in itself is a problematic notion). Although he recognised the need to co-ordinate and exchange such experiences he was opposed to the need for any separate party to unify such work. In contrast, Castoriadis was of the view that the working class desperately needed such centralised organisation, especially as the revolutionary groups had become greatly scattered across the country. To establish such an organisation, or party as he considered it, would inevitably be to form a vanguard, which of course is fraught with problems. In the extreme, this would amount to the Satrean position that claims that those repressed always need some institution or organisation above them in order to afford resistance. In other words, it is the existence of an organisation – in essence a fetish or binding factor – that allows a class consciousness to come to the fore. The contradictions between spontaneity and organisation are all too evident, since there is no way to act unless in an existing organisation.

By 1958 *Socialisme ou Barbarie* split into two factions led respectively by Castoriadis and Lefort, and with their political activities continuing and even growing, feeding into the actions taken by factory workers' and union collectives. However as the economic situation began to improve after the immediate post-war period, Castoriadis began to reformulate his theories and in particular he began to question his own Marxist position. Fundamentally he came to question the Marxist assumptions of history that understood 'development' as central to economic conditions, and more crucially a rationalism capable of unveiling hidden logics in the system. Thus, as van der Linden points out, Castoriadis's views altered dramatically. Revolutionaries could no longer, it would seem, consider themselves to be Marxist, but should instead to be committed to a 'new theory and politics, which realises that there is no such thing as a total view and leadership of history'. Without doubt, times do change, and continue to do so - sometimes dramatically. When Castoriadis was writing for *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, communism was actually a genuine and credible political option. Today, one can be forgiven for thinking that communism (as a political concept) vaporised with the so-called 'End of History' pronounced around the time of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Yet, the search for a 'new theory and politics' is surely far from over, the only question being, where can one turn?

When Lyotard came to look back upon his time spent with the *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, he was speaking to, and for, an assembled group of notable academics in October 1991, concurrent, as he notes, with a 'state of suspense' from the Gulf War. Lyotard wished to note particularly, that his reflection on this early period of his life is not an exercise in nostalgia; but rather to 'realise just how different the circumstances and expectations for situation analysis are today'. Indeed, he remarks upon a significant change: for '[u]nlike a critical practice institute [such as *Socialisme ou barbarie*], we are of course not required to outline the direction of interventions. The only interventions we may envisage take form in the publication of papers and collections.' However, rather than simply undermine the importance of such (paper) intervention, he suggests we can only really consider it to be 'something else', of a quite different modality and historical order.

The change then emerges from a change affecting the historical situation, and subsequently the state of criticism itself. As Lyotard puts it:

> …let us say that militant praxis, in our countries at least, has become defensive praxis. We are constantly having to assert the rights of minorities […] We have to sign petitions, write papers, organise conferences, join committees, take part in polls, and publish books. In doing so, we assume the regular responsibilities attached to the position of the intellectuals. I say "regular" because these practices are permitted and even encouraged by the law - or, at least, by the implicit or formal rules of our positions. Western society not only allows us to participate in these practices; it in fact requires us to take part in them - it needs the specific contributions that we are able to provide.

However, in the face of an all-pervasive 'liberal late capitalism', Lyotard nevertheless still considers it possible to keep open 'something' that has otherwise become perhaps too open, or 'regular'. This cannot simply be a Marxist criticism anymore, which now, as he suggests, has 'something obsolete, even tedious about it'. Instead, he holds out on a definition of radical criticism that is to be more *imaginative*. To follow the line of argument, it is perhaps again useful to think of Winston Smith:

> By sitting in the alcove, and keeping well back, Winston was able to remain outside the range of the telescreen, so far as sight went. […] The thing that he was about to do was open a diary. This was not illegal (nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws), but if detected it was reasonably certain that it would be punished by death, or at least twenty-five years in a forced-labour camp.

As Lyotard points out, today the 'fight for emancipation' is legitimated by the law itself. Nevertheless, and just as for Wintson, nothing is illegal, the regularity of openness we experience today, carries with it the potential for 'critical' collapse. Indeed, if there is too much openness, the opportunity to make a stand, or claim is diminished - such a claim will simply come to exist alongside all other claims. This is the paradox of democracy: too much of it is meaningless. And the telescreen can be taken as a reminder of our being bound up in the world, with no possibilities for standing apart, no position from which to offer critique. Winston, however, can remind us that there is always a position from which to write.

> In small clumsy letters he wrote: *April 4th, 1984.*

It is certainly not a date he can be sure of, but it is enough to mark a point on from which he can realise the enormity of his situation - 'for whom, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder, was he writing this diary? For the future, for the unborn?'

In a bid to analyse the 'situation' at the time of his particular writing in 1991, Lyotard considers two major 'events': the 'fall of the Berlin Wall' and the 'Gulf crisis'. These events, he notes, were 'played out' through the media for all to see, and comment upon. The possibilities to make sense of these events were perhaps simultaneously all too possible (with the 'transparency' and access of news information), and yet equally ever impossible. Crucially certain questions and possibilities for dialogue diminish. Lyotard remarks: in the case of the collapse of communism, one might ask the somewhat

paradoxical (but nevertheless finally answered) question of just 'how could the demand for radical criticism, as formulated by the East German collegues, be satisfied if criticising, questioning, and imagining […] actually require the openness that only an open system provides?'. Indeed, for the 'radical voice of the East German, there is no position from which to make such a judgement - if indeed there ever was. So, whilst critique is possible, and for Lyotard desirable, the outcome remains, 'there is no conclusion; the conclusion is deferred; some "blanks" always remain in the "text," whatever text it is. This blank is the critique's resource'.

And so, despite the fact that this 'blank' is also the trademark that the open system affixes to the works of the mind', Lyotard seeks to take on a responsibility for it. Different then to the otherwise regulated spaces (such as the regulated spaces of liberal democracy), the blank, or openness asserted by Lyotard is meant to allow for 'something besides critique: imagination'. And in this case, 'allows for a story to be freely told'. Indeed, he goes on to place the events of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Gulf War in a far grander tale than can be told by humankind, in a fable of the creation and end of the universe. This portentous tale he urges 'represents the grand narrative that this world stubbornly tries to tell about itself, even though the grand narratives have obviously failed'. Without the room to be able to explain this in greater detail, I take Lyotard to be opening up the potential to recover - without making the mistake of trying to take up a position outside of what is critiqued - a very different open-end of thought, one that takes the opportunity that everything and anything can be articulated in the open-system, but re-envisioning matters of critical concern, of re-inscribing a critical purpose.

If then – in view of these dilemmas of the open-system – 'situation analysis' is really to remain a critical resource, it is undoubtedly in need of change, of re-imagination. And change can be considered in itself a driving force, since it marks – in a *practice* of theory – the reality of other possibilities, other conclusions, of re-positioning situations that can be shared again. And, the layering of voices and histories here is intended to demonstrate the on-going thread of situation analysis as an on-going imagination. When Lyotard thinks back upon his time with *Socialisme ou barbarie*, it is not simply a matter of history, but rather to allow a new re-imagined instance of critical enquiry. In our own time the exercise of situation analysis must be complicated, embedded and even fictionalised, but equally, with such procedures of deconstruction, something can be said to remain, something *lives on*.

Of course, Lyotard's evocation of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is certainly not the first. Another significant trace can be noted in the period immediately following the most fervent times for the group. It is important to note that during the forties and fifties *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and its namesake journal were not actually widely read or known, but when it came to the events of May and June 1968, as van der Linden documents, '[t]he remnants of the journal which had been unsaleable up to then … suddenly become a hot-selling item'. Furthermore, the ideas that had been circulating amongst the group (which until then had not gained significant credence) were now being confirmed in widespread 'public' action. The link between theory and practice is not only made, it is made tangibly. This once aspiring vanguard, all of a sudden, and with greater force, rears up from virtual obscurity: one might say a 'rearguard-vanguard'.

It could not have been possible to predict the events of 1968, nor is it really possible to finally categorise them now. The question of definition, in the moment of real

action, will always be either too early, or too late. And in this respect, as noted at the very outset, it can only be premature to ask what *Situation Analysis* 'is'. Perhaps, after all, it can only hope to be itself a rearguard-vanguard; a definition to come in time, as with the fate of *Socialisme ou barbarie*. Indeed as van der Linden writes, '*Right from the start* there was a debate on matters of organisation in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. What exactly was the group's self-definition?' (my emphasis). In other words - and to afford perhaps a more immediate future - what *Situation Analysis* really *is*, is what it shall become. And this is not to leave it to the prevailing winds of change, to voices of prediction and aspiration: rather, *Situation Analysis* can be thought of as that moment 'right from the start' noted by van der Linden. It is the debates, whether internal and external, that ranged 'right from the start' of *Socialisme ou barbarie* – and along with many other organisations and instigations since – which bear witness to the precise moment of engagement *Situation Analysis* itself wishes to nurture. Indeed if it is to be anything in itself, *Situation Analysis* is a point from which to move onwards. In both a practical and theoretical sense, its forum marks the moment in which there is noted the possibility of change. In other words, in the short-term, the fact that (this contingent brand of) *Situation Analysis* meets today to carry forward a critical commitment, bears critically upon what such a practice comes to mean in the long-run…

Notes

1. Collier, Peter (1993) '*Liber*: Liberty and literature' in *French Cultural Studies*, 4:3, p.291-304.
2. Chapter 4, 'City in Pieces' in Victor Burgin's (1996) *In/Different Spaces*, University of California Press, p.139-160.
3. Lyotard, J.-F. (1993). 'The Wall, the Gulf, and the Sun: A Fable' in *Politics, Theory, and Contemporary Culture*. M. Poster. New York, Columbia U.P.**:** 261-275.
4. Marcel van der Linden, 'Socialisme ou Barbarie: A French Revolutionary Group (1949-65), in *Left History,* Vol. 5, no. 1, 1997.
5. Largely this critique deals with the perception of an overly simple contrast of socialism and capitalism, along with an expressed dissatisfaction with the representation of the Soviet Union as a society in transition to an ideal socialism.