Cadillacs, Jet Planes and H-bombs: American Art in France following the Liberation

Winner of the Millstone Prize

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The years following World War Two have been the focus of studies that describe the period in French history as one of intense transformation and disruption, with attendant challenges to traditional national identity.¹ During the rapid postwar shift from a traditional to a modern, industrial economy over the course of the 1950’s, the French experienced “rural exodus” and inhabitants took up new consumer habits and modern lifestyles. Laurence Wylie

¹“Rarely had an old society been so constrained to partake of the present and to protect its historical, religious and political values…” Jean-Pierre Rioux, The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 445. Richard F. Kuise described concerns regarding French identity at risk in the 1950s in the course of American-style modernization in his chapter “The American Temptation – The Coming of Consumer Society,” Seducing The French. The Dilemma of Americanization (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). The study cites echoes of Georges Duhamel’s America the Menace (1931) in which Americans were stereotyped as materialistic, soulless and lacking in civilization. A symbol of the encroachment of American habits on traditional France includes consumption of Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola was denied access to the French market in 1948, but by 1950 that embargo was lifted and soon Coca-Cola came to be viewed as an American intrusion upon tradition French habits (Kuisel, 61). Michel Winock has taken a different approach to anti-Americanism in France, suggesting negative reactions to American culture and society be interpreted less as a factor of American agency, and more as a factor of identity politics internal to France. Michel Winock, “L’antiaméricanisme français” in Nationalisme, antisémitisme et fascisme en France (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982).
famously described the dramatic changes of the postwar decade when France was transformed from a nation comprised largely of small farms and isolated rural villages to a nation of which it could be said, “The Concorde has replaced the Peasant as the emblem of French identity.” Such rapid economic change in the midst of increased conflict with the French colonies; a rising tide of foreign immigrants meeting the demands for new labor; and a perceived “Americanization” going on within the hexagon, left many with the sense that French society would never be the same.

What remains largely under-studied in the postwar period, however, is the dynamic ascribed to the historic role of fine art in the construction, or perceived destruction of, traditional French identity. The role played by art in the construction of identity is particularly strong in France. Thus, cases of perceived threat to traditional French values represented by avant-garde artistic practices, and the eruptions spurred by these perceived threats, have long been of interest to students of French society. From the...

2 France had not turned early to large-scale industrial production as had other western nations, and thus entered the second world war with an economy still heavily weighted in the agricultural sector. It was a sector still largely characterized by subsistence farming, a secondary sector that was retarding industrial growth. See Tom Kemp, *Economic Forces in French History* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1971); Perry Anderson, “Fernand Braudel and National Identity” in *A Zone of Engagement* (New York: Verso, 1992); Stanley Hoffmann, *Decline or Renewal? France since the 1930s* (New York: Viking Press, 1974); Kuisel, *Seducing the French*; Rioux, *The Fourth Republic*.

3 Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994). Like Kenneth Silver, David Batchelor, “This Liberty and This Order: Art in France after the First World War,” *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism. Art Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), examines the rhetoric of classicism as “a thinly veiled ideology of nationalism,” drawing attention to the rhetorical opposition of classical and nonclassical values so widely adopted in the effort to define the proper character of French culture. He suggests that the definition of French culture in classical terms accounts for the French Surrealists’ oppositional interest in German Romanticism. “If my claim is correct, this may help to explain why the term “revolution” was regularly and insistently flaunted by Surrealists in their early publications, when they appeared to have little political or theoretical understanding with which to back it up. It may also help to make sense of the Surrealists’ theatrical and public championing of Germany and things Germanic, since to identify with Germany was – rhetorically or otherwise – to stand outside and in opposition to the political, moral and aesthetic mainstays of French culture” (83).
Dreyfus Affair forward, historians have noted the French reluctance to surrender a vision of a composite aesthetic ideal and have followed with interest the aesthetic “call to order” present at moments of national crisis. 4 When the French were first introduced to experimental artwork coming to France from across the Atlantic at mid-century, the French crise identitaire would indeed find strong voice within French critical reaction. This was particularly true in regard to American abstract expressionism, an import that would serve as yet another historical opportunity for the staunch defense of tradition française.

The fear of “Americanization” prompted an appeal for a fixed French character in French art in the post-WWII era. Between 1953 and 1959, a newly created International Program of New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) launched a series of large-scale contemporary American art exhibits brought to Paris.5


5 *Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors* was exhibited at the French National Museum of Modern Art, then housed at the Palais de Tokyo, 24 April to 7 June 1953, featuring 56 modern paintings and 18 three-dimensional works by artists such as Alexander Calder, Stuart Davis, Arshile Gorky, Morris Graves, John Marin, David Smith and Jackson Pollock. In 1955 the MoMA returned to Paris, carrying its *50 Ans d’Art aux Etats-Unis* (known at home as *Modern Art in the United States*) exhibit of 106 contemporary American paintings, displayed at the French
As might be expected, many French perceived the influx of American art as an invasion by other means. What is particularly striking is the manner in which hypercritical reaction to the American exhibits reached far beyond aesthetic concerns. Apprehensions expressed by art critics and fine arts administrators disclosed fears that through exposure to this work, France would be tainted by the materialism, consumerism, spiritual shallowness and loss of classical humanistic values characteristic of market-driven America. That America and its market-driven, consumer-style society was an especial threat to heroic French values in the post World War II period was a common assumption among intellectuals and artists. Fears of an anticultural and antihumanistic future, associated with the emphasis on technological progress and materialism, were regularly voiced in the 1950s by French intellectuals Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul National Museum of Modern Art from 30 March to 15 May. In that same year, another MoMA traveling exhibit, featuring American painters from its Paintings by Young Artists circulating exhibit was shown in the French National Museum of Modern Art, 12 October to 12 November. From October 1956 to June 1957 the MoMA circulated its Recent American Watercolorists featuring 80 works by 41 contemporary artists, including many employing abstract expressionist approaches, through Laon, St. Quentin, Reims, Clermont-Ferrand and Nice. Jackson Pollock and The New American Painting, exhibited 16 January to 15 February 1959.

Sartre, André Siegfried, Raymond Aron and Michel Crozier.\(^7\) When the French were given the first opportunity to witness large-scale MoMA traveling exhibits of contemporary expressionist art coming out of America, these fears were given voice by critics who feared that French society, in coming in touch with yet another American threat, would lose touch with classical humanistic values.

The assumption that traditional French values were especially threatened by America was much discussed by artists, critics and cultural authorities in the course of their critique of American painting coming out of New York. French avant-garde painter Jean Bazaine summed it up in this manner: “This country [speaking of America] will encroach upon us only if we forget... if we fail to call upon our own voices; we can decide this will not happen: to be French painters, in the French tradition, is the destiny we must undertake.”\(^8\) Indeed, in the course of responding to the MoMA’s traveling exhibits, French artists and cultural authorities would be given an opportunity to do just that. From the first MoMA traveling exhibit of 1953 to the 1959 capstone show featuring Abstract Expressionism, such as the works of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, French critics took ample opportunity to measure qualities they associated with what was commonly reported as “truly French” art against what were deemed decidedly “less than French” approaches coming from across the Atlantic.

One critic reviewing the 1955 traveling exhibit, “Fifty Years of American Art,” described the show as an example of the “monstrous face of America” after exiting a display that featured Stuart Davis’s paintings alongside consumer objects, such as cigarette packages, mouthwash bottles and salt shakers (figure 1).\(^9\) Another French critic reviewing the same exhibit commented sarcastically, “Only a Cadillac, a jet plane and an H-bomb are

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\(^7\)See Kuisel, “The American Temptation.”


\(^9\)The intent of including consumer objects was to display the properties of contemporary American graphic design. For example, a box of Lucky Strike cigarettes was displayed next to Stuart Davis’ painting, Lucky Strike. MOMA press summaries do note that this practice particularly offended French critics. International Council and International Program Records, I.A.470. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
When a blockbuster show featuring the action paintings of Jackson Pollock (figure 2) was brought by the MoMA to Paris in 1959, French critics and cultural commentators expressed their fears of what was perceived as yet another American “cultural invasion,” making public appeals to francité in the wake of the perceived American threat to traditional French values. One critic deemed Pollock “the James Dean of American painting” expressing his fear that action painting might be taken up in France, assimilated “as easily as French children adopted Davy Crocket hats.”

10 Critic Pierre Descargues in Lettres Francaises (9 April 1955) IC/IP, I.A.470. MoMA Archives, NY.

Françoise Choay, writing for *France Observateur*, openly acknowledged the role that negative American stereotypes played in much French critical reaction to the exhibits.\(^{12}\) Kenneth Rexroth, writing for *Art News*, decried critical reaction to the MoMA exhibits brought to Paris as “...a parade of busted clichés and demoralized preconceptions,” claiming that critics “just went to the newspaper marquee and had the librarian fish out the press notices of Buffalo Bill's first European tour, and went to work with scissors and paste.”\(^{13}\) Rexroth's reference to “busted clichés” indicated the mythic roles assigned to American figures such as Bill Coty (Buffalo Bill), the result of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European tours. Buffalo Bill symbolized to Europeans, American freedom and wild energy associated with westward expansion.\(^{14}\)

It was Rexroth's conclusion that the poor reception given the 1959 Pollock show was to a significant degree, motivated by factors other than artistic. “Even civilized papers like *Express* and *Combat* had their men bone up by going to a Western movie and reading of the more inflammatory recent statements of American

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13 Kenneth Rexroth, “U.S. Art across time and space: Americas seen abroad,” *Art News* 58 (Summer 1959), 52.

generals. Almost all other criticism was simply a workout of the given paper’s editorial policy vis-à-vis the State Department, Standard Oil, Coca-Cola, Rock'n Roll.

Within the wider context of a perceived Americanization of French culture going on at the time, appeals to particular aspects of “Frenchness” in matters of artistic taste found resonance. One particularly salient feature of French critical reaction was the call to resist market forces many believed played too strong a role in the rise of American painting styles. French art historian Germain Viatte, witness to the period, described Paris in the 1950s as a center of artistic inspiration menaced by American-style market pressure: “In the late 1950s, when ‘consumer society’ transformed cities, when television transformed social relations, when the dictates of economic expansion began to assert themselves, the art world found itself impacted as well.”15 As one art dealer in the Fourth Republic cynically described it, it seemed the time had come to “teach collectors to discard old paintings as they discard old automobiles and refrigerators.”16

A small but telling incident reported in Le Monde in 1958 demonstrated the passion with which many cultural officials and artists resisted the notion of market-driven artistic taste – a trend they associated with American contemporary art.17 Georges


16Anonymous dealer quoted in Raymonde Moulin, The French Art Market: A Sociological View, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 30. Moulin credits the rise of American abstract expressionism and the ensuing eclipse of the Paris School to American market manipulation. In her description of the French art market in the several decades following World War II she not only investigates market speculation, but the role played by major exhibits as well. “Those in the art business are well aware that historical studies and major museum shows awaken the public’s interest in particular kinds of painting, leading to a reevaluation of the accepted scale of values” (145-6). For the purposes of this study, her observation suggests further significance to the series of American abstract expressionist exhibits brought by the MOMA to Paris between 1953 and 1959.

17Patricia Mainardi has described the conflict over “pictures to see” and “pictures to sell” in the context of varied tastes in painting in the French Third Republic. See Patricia Mainardi, The End of the Salon, Art and the State in the Early Third Republic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Raymonde Moulin described the conflict in the Fourth Republic. “Dealers try to conceal the mercantile aspects of their profession. In this they are merely playing the role expected of them by
Cheyssial, a 1932 Prix de Rome recipient, painter of portraits, landscapes and religious subjects, was elected to the Académie des beaux-arts that year in an upset victory over modernist painter Edouard Goerg. Twice the vote had been taken and twice the Academy had reached a deadlock. Suddenly, in a surprise turn of events, one of Goerg’s supporters switched his vote to Cheyssial. Traditionalist Cheyssial was thereby elected to the Academy by a vote of 22 to 20.

society, which, though ruled by profit, wants to protect the purity of its cultural values” (quoted in Mainardi, 59).
Following the vote, one described by *Le Monde* as carrying “international impact,” it was reported that a number of members stormed out of the room, angry that an advocate of modern painting had lost the election, and that a lesser-known, academic painter had been elected in his place (see news clipping, figure 3). The supporters of traditionalist painter Cheyssial retorted by “praising his merits as a free-standing artist, who owed none of his success to dealers and all of his success to himself.”

Edouard Goerg, while a modernist, benefitted considerably from promotion by art dealers. Cheyssial’s advocates proudly defended the lesser-known painter: he owed none of his success to the art market, and thus had retained his integrity as an artist. *Le Monde* could not help but ask, rather tongue-in-cheek, whether the Academy would continue to seek its members among the unknown and unsuccessful! However, to many members of the Academy, indeed, the refusal to be associated with American-style market pressure was a heroic gesture. Within the context of a perceived Americanization of French culture at the time, just such resistance amounted to an affirmation of *francité* in matters of artistic taste.

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Figure 4. Critic Bernard Dorival, “Un juvénilité un peu fruste” *Arts* (January-February 1959).

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It was precisely this lack of aesthetic tradition that prompted many visual arts spokespersons in postwar France to criticize American abstract expressionist experiments with the familiar charge of the “infantile” nature of American cultural production that left them so American-art averse. Its lack of a mature cultural past, many claimed, disallowed inspiration and depth. However, it was also widely recognized in the postwar period that the American “child” was no longer childishly harmless. America was producing and exporting works of art described as not so much innocent, but rather, “rebellious” and “adolescent” (see news clipping, figure 4). As one critic reviewing the 1955 MoMA show brought to Paris for a Communist weekly put it, American painting had taken a “hysterical turn.” Its behavior exhibited a disproportionate predilection for spontaneous expression, straining for originality at the expense of technical competence. The series of exhibits brought to Paris by the MoMA over the course of the 1950’s indeed proved to be defiant, with Pollock’s drip paintings especially challenging. As anyone who has stood in front of a mural-sized Pollock can attest, Pollock’s work from the period is particularly provocative in both scale and formal daring. Physically and visually imposing pieces are comprised of tangles of thrown paint in direct confrontation to norms of painting practice (figure 2). This provoked many in the French press to observe that much contemporary American art appeared wild, fiery and out of control.

In this context, French emphasis upon technical discipline was much discussed, as critics and art authorities postulated the existence of purportedly “native qualities” of French art made all the more apparent in the face of postwar American contemporary examples. Classical norms of balance, harmony and moderation belonged within the French aesthetic tradition, many critics claimed; these norms had been passed down from earlier French masters and then assimilated into twentieth-century, modern form by modern French practitioners such as Cezanne (figure 5), Braque, Bonnard, and Matisse. In contrast, it was often stated in the French press that America had no tradition and no masters, and as a result, no means of “discipline.”

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19Richard Kuisel in Seducing the French discusses the stereotype of Americans as “les grands enfants” in place for a good part of the century and refers in this context to Georges Duhamel's America the Menace (1931), echoes of which were still present in the postwar era.

Paradoxically, in the process of reacting against less-than-classical modern approaches taken up by contemporary American painters in the 1950s, authoritative French voices effectively marginalized French artists who were working in a manner similar to American experimental artists. These expressionist artists in the hexagon would later be recognized as among the nation’s most important. A number of French-American group shows in Paris even demonstrated stylistic trends simultaneously taken up by French and American expressionists in the postwar years. “Véhémences confrontées,” (figure 6) which opened on 18 March 1951 at Galerie Nina Dausset and was organized by Michel Tapié, brought together contemporary American action painters with Parisian l’informel artists including Mathieu (figure 7), Hartung, Wols, and Bryen. A series of “outsider artists” exhibits took place in the early 1950s at the Gallery Facchetti, combining American and French l’informel works. In 1957, another “Véhémences confrontées” show opened at Galerie Nina Dausset featuring Bryen, De Kooning, Hartung, a Canadian artist named Riopelle, and other gestural painters.
Yet American painters exploring gestural, expressionist approaches were dubbed by the majority of French critics as strikingly foreign. One might wonder why American gestural painters would not have been considered at least artistic “cousins” to the French. This seems especially curious given the impact of the School of Paris and its surrealist emigré influence on the New York School (Figures 8, 9).  


22 Even the Museum of Modern Art, New York, raised the question: “Curiously few critics made comparisons between recent American painting and the works of such avant-garde French artists such as Dubuffet, Fautrier, Mathieu, or Soulages. They tended instead to weigh contemporary American art against their composite ideal of a ‘classic French art.’” MoMA Press summary of 1955 “50 Ans” exhibit. IC/IP, I.A. 470. MoMA Archives, New York.
American Art in France

Yet when American work with expressionist and surrealist influence traveled back to France from across the Atlantic in the MoMA exhibits, the very approaches stemming from the early 20th century School of Paris were deemed by a majority of Gallic critics as decidedly “less than French.”

Figure 7. Georges Mathieu, Pour Une Alienation Definitive Du Logos, oil on canvas, 38 x 77”, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Permission of Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Art Resource, NY.

An explanation for this apparent contradiction lies in the fact that the early 20th century School of Paris was itself never embraced by cultural authorities in France as particularly “French.” Largely made of immigrants with names like Picasso, Ernst, Kandinsky, and Modigliani, it represented what many viewed as an anomic cosmopolitanism. Hence, American work associated with the School of Paris was, for all that, not considered “French.” Many French art officials and art critics commenting on MoMA exhibits in the 1950s explained that it was precisely the rootless cosmopolitanism, the lack of national idiom in contemporary American painting, which condemned it.

Many felt that the lack of national idiom relegated the sort of work coming out of America to a completely subjective vision. To many French observers, such an aesthetic portended divorce of art from the public. Again, what is most striking in the reaction of critics and authorities to the traveling MoMA exhibits is the manner in which hypercritical reaction reached far beyond artistic concerns. A review of critical responses to the MoMA shows discloses that authorities from the ideological and aesthetic left and right alike agreed that the American work threatened what

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Journal of the Western Society for French History
was essentially considered “French.” As one French critic reviewing the 1959 abstract expressionist show from America put it, “It is an art which is obsessively individualistic . . . in the absolute liberty which it promotes, each seeks only to render feelings or emotional shock.”24 From the perspective of the French left, the apparently self-absorbed individualism of experimental American painters seemed the epitome of bourgeois mannerism. From the perspective of the French right, it appeared rootless, lost from its moorings in a national heritage and recognizable institutional order.


French critics and art authorities of both the left and the right, unwilling to relinquish art to the realm of interior subjectivity, consistently championed yet another “French” virtue seemingly absent in the new American painting of the 1950s: the

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victory of heroic sensibility. In the course of reviewing the American shows, heroic sensibility was much touted by critics as a quality indigenous to “truly French” art. In contrast to the New York School, it was argued, French art did not divorce itself from the public, nor from social concerns. Yet in the minds of the majority of French commentators, American abstract expressionism did just that. Commentators responding to the MoMA exhibits brought to France from 1953 to 1959 claimed American abstract expressionism lacked heroic value, further distinguishing it from “French” art. Here again, the reaction of critics and authorities to the traveling MoMA exhibits reached far beyond aesthetic concerns.

Figure 9. André Masson, _Errance I_, tempera on canvas, 1959, 51 x 37 7/8”, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation /Art Resource, NY.

Criticism of the “unheroic” American art included complaints of the moral and spiritual vacuum it represented. “To the extent that it poses no problems of existence and has no need of spiritual philosophy, it accords perfectly with the American
spirit,” claimed one critic in a right-wing paper.\(^{25}\) Eye-catching plasticity, or undulating skeins of paint, it was often expressed, represented the limit of the abstract expressionist aesthetic. Thus, abstract expressionism seemed to suit the non-spiritual, materialistic Americans. In response to the MoMA exhibits brought to France in the 1950s, authorities disclosed fears that in the course of exposure to American abstract expressionism, the French would be tainted by the spiritual shallowness and loss of classical humanistic values characteristic of market-driven America. Art critics and officials within the hexagon continued to affirm the importance of heroic sensibility as a feature indigenous to “truly French” art. One wonders to what degree French hypercritical reaction to the lack of perceived heroic virtue in American painting did not stem from hypersensitivity at home.

As many have described of the postwar period, the work of reconstruction in France required tackling more than material deprivation—a deep sense of moral failure also plagued the nation. One need only consider the wartime collaborationist behavior of the Vichy government, the failure to carry out domestic reforms which had formed the basis of wartime Resistance doctrine,\(^{26}\) and the blight represented by harsh reprisals in the colonies.\(^{27}\) \(^{28}\) Moral sensibility had been a standard measure


\(^{26}\)Elections in the summer of 1946 resulted in the demise of tripartite leadership, which had included French Communists, along with French Socialists and the (Liberal Catholic) MRP. The shift demonstrated a revival of interest in Right and Center politics and established what became known as “Third Force” government described as drawing its strength “precisely from its refusal of all ideological combat.” Rioux, *The Fourth Republic*, 191. Anti-Communist pressure following the Truman Doctrine of containment contributed to the withdrawal of the Communist participants from the leftist government of Socialist Paul Ramadier and the emergence of “Third Force” government mentioned above. The isolation of the Communists allowed conservative groups to improve their parliamentary position. Also contributing to the perception of a loss of moral high ground was the failed purgation process following Vichy. By December 1948, 69% of those condemned as collaborationists by Resistance councils were released, and over time the French government exhibited a loss of interest in the *épuration* quest. Goals of national reconstruction obviated the original goals of purging the political and industrial leadership of suspected collaborationists. Rioux, *The Fourth Republic*, 35.

\(^{27}\)Stanley Hoffmann referred to deep feelings of inferiority harbored by postwar French leadership over the behavior of the French
of “francité” much discussed by artists within the group “Young Artists in the French Tradition” assembled during the German Occupation; it was now often repeated as a French aesthetic virtue in the course of exposure to American abstract expressionism following the war.

In summary, apprehensions voiced in the course of reviewing the American traveling exhibits brought to Paris by the MoMA between 1953 and 1959 addressed wider fears plaguing the French nation, including threats to traditional identity, the failure to address societal concerns, and tell-tale marks of less-than-heroic values. What is striking in the critical response to exhibits brought to France by the MoMA between 1953 and 1959 is the manner in which hypercritical reaction reached far beyond artistic concerns. Whether from at home or abroad, art which could be associated with rootless cosmopolitanism, disconnection from societal concerns, or less-than-heroic values, especially those attached to consumerism, would have difficulty finding acceptance in the hexagon during its postwar crise identitaire.


Laude claimed that French artists aware of colonial atrocities were provoked, as a result of these circumstances, to further consider their moral and social role in Fourth Republic society. Jean Laude, Problèmes de la Peinture en Europe et aux États-Unis (1944-1951) Art et Idéologies 20 (1978): 26.

Many in the 1950s argued that American abstract artists could on this count be distinguished from their French counterparts (for example, abstract painter Jean Fautrier, who as one critic claimed, addressed the moral dilemmas of his day through his work. Giulio Carlo Argan, “Jean Fautrier,” Cimaise 7 (Oct.-Nov.-Dec. 1960): 40. Argan accounted for the perceived distance between American painting and that of Fautrier, to Fautrier’s preoccupation with moral and social concerns linked to historic situations: “And that’s the thing which gives Fautrier’s painting its “European” element, which cannot be linked to abstractionism and must be related to Europe’s historic situation . . .”